

## DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 408 112

RC 020 870

TITLE Recognition of Prior Learning for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples. Project Report.

INSTITUTION Australian National Training Authority, Melbourne. National Staff Development Committee.; Australian National Federation of Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups.

REPORT NO ISBN-0-642-25468-0

PUB DATE 96

NOTE 143p.

PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070) -- Reports - Evaluative (142)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC06 Plus Postage.

DESCRIPTORS Access to Education; Adult Education; \*Cross Cultural Training; Cultural Awareness; Cultural Pluralism; \*Cultural Relevance; Educational Policy; Equal Education; Experience; Experiential Learning; Foreign Countries; \*Indigenous Populations; Nonformal Education; Nontraditional Education; \*Prior Learning; School Community Relationship; Secondary Education; \*Staff Development; Vocational Education; \*Vocational Evaluation

IDENTIFIERS \*Australia; Australia (Torres Strait)

## ABSTRACT

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is an Australian program that helps people to obtain formal recognition for relevant work experience, life experience, and formal training. This report documents existing good practices in RPL assessment and staff training for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, provides information on culturally appropriate RPL processes for these groups in the National Vocational Education and Training system, and advises the National Staff Development Committee on approaches for training RPL staff working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Project findings emerged from national consultations with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and a search of Australian and overseas literature. The project found that some RPL programs currently exist for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Some have the potential to meet the goals of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy; others do not provide for local cultural needs nor are they underpinned by the goals of access, equity, and self-determination. The development of culturally appropriate RPL practices must build upon existing examples of good practice, and initiatives in RPL staff development for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples should incorporate the following: self-determination at the local level after the community has evaluated appropriate information about RPL; equitable access based on cultural considerations regarding language, customs, values, and priorities; and mechanisms whereby Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities can participate in determining the processes for establishing culturally appropriate RPL. An appendix includes details of case studies in the report. Also included are an extensive bibliography and a glossary. (TD)

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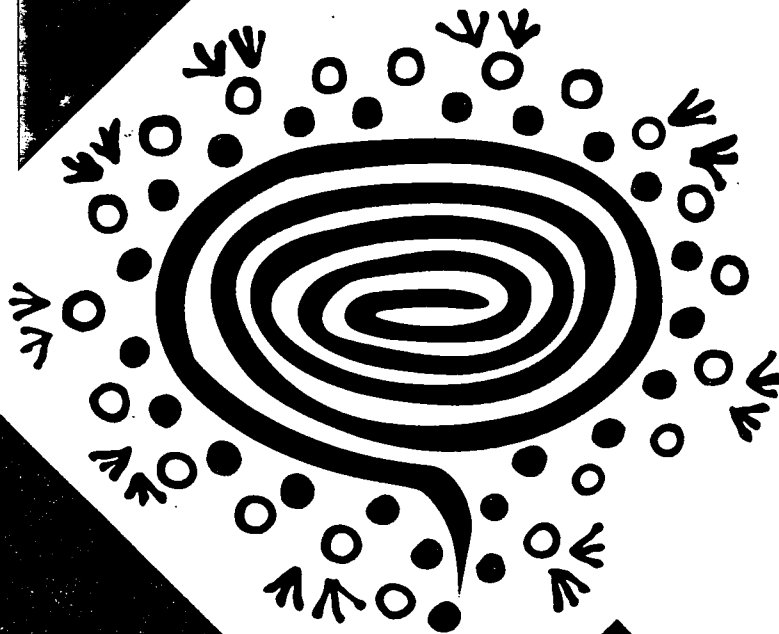
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# Research Report

## *Recognition of Prior Learning for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples*

A joint initiative of

NATIONAL  
FEDERATION OF  
ABORIGINAL EDUCATION  
CONSULTATIVE  
GROUPS



AUSTRALIAN  
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*When a pelican lands, it flies in a series of circles, descending gracefully in a spiral path towards a natural point until its feet meet with the land or water.*

*The analogy of a pelican landing can be related to the nature of assessing the RPL of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person.*

*To truly appreciate the life struggles, contributions and achievements of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person, RPL practitioners need to look beyond the immediate needs and circumstances of the learner and appreciate the diversity of life experiences the individual brings to the learning situation.*

*To ensure the totality of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person's prior learning is recognised, the environment must be supportive and the instruments must be culturally inclusive, appropriate for the learner, and utilised in a manner which eliminates barriers to success.*

*Like the natural motion of a pelican landing, this will allow the practitioner to view the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person holistically and produce an RPL outcome which encapsulates the individual's full competencies.*

Shane Williams  
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Educator, Queensland

### Cover design by Maryanne Samm—Victoria, 1996

In keeping with Shane Williams' analogy of the process of assessing RPL in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, and the circular flight pattern of the pelican as it descends, the cover design represents the possible stages of that process.

#### *The symbols*



The circling motion of the pelican is seen here from an aerial view. It shows the need to look at the 'big' picture—the need to take a holistic view when approaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. There is no ending to this shape and no beginning. The possibilities and successful outcomes are in our hands.



These circles/dots represent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.



These circles represent the 'assessor'. The colour encircling them shows the 'assessor' gaining knowledge—absorbing the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander experience.



The footprints show that the pelican has landed. They represent action and development. The process has been successful. We go back to our communities and the real work begins.

# Project Report

## Recognition of Prior Learning for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples

1995

*'For RPL to work, two cultures will have to meet.'*

*This national project is a joint initiative of  
the National Staff Development Committee and the  
National Federation of Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups*

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First published 1996

ISBN 0 642 25468 0

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# Acknowledgments

The project was commissioned by the National Staff Development Committee in collaboration with the National Federation of Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups.

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The names of the people who provided the project information during the national consultations can be found on pages 115 to 121 of this report.



# Executive Summary

## The Project

This project was commissioned by the National Staff Development Committee (NSDC) in collaboration with the National Federation of Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups (NFAECG). The research aimed to provide information to guide Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) staff development for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and others working in the National Vocational Education and Training System (NVETS).

RPL has the potential to enhance equity and access to training and career path development for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

The objectives of this project were to:

- document good practice in RPL assessment
- provide information on culturally appropriate RPL processes
- advise the NSDC on an approach for RPL training for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and others working in the NVET System.

## What is RPL?

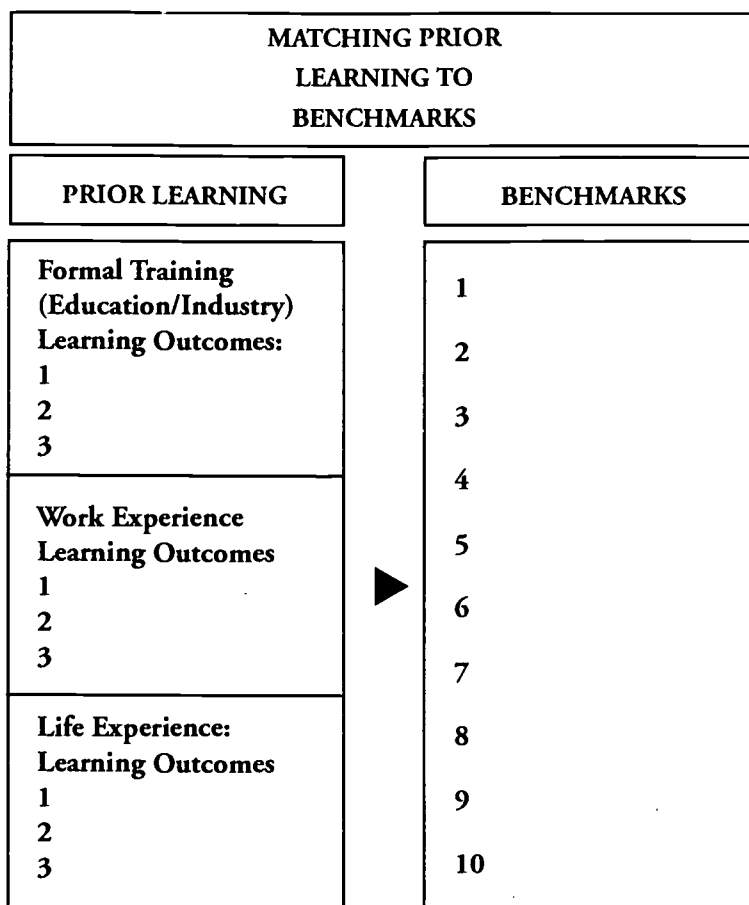
Recognition of Prior Learning is a process which helps people to obtain formal recognition for relevant work experience, life experience and formal training.

RPL is a process of matching the skills and knowledge of an individual against the learning outcomes in a course of study or against a set of competency standards in the workplace. The learning outcomes and/or competency standards are referred to as the **benchmarks** in this report.

If, as a result of an RPL assessment, it is certain that the applicant is competent in relation to the benchmarks, then that person may be granted formal recognition for those particular areas of skill and knowledge.

An RPL applicant is encouraged to gather evidence to substantiate the claim for RPL. An interactive stage of the RPL process follows which involves the applicant in an interview, which is more like a supportive discussion. A support person or persons can be brought along to this discussion together with any evidence gathered. The discussion aims to involve the applicant in the process of matching his or her skills and knowledge against the benchmarks. Once this is done, a decision may be made about whether RPL can be granted.

The following diagram illustrates matching an individual's skills and knowledge against the benchmarks:



### Who is Involved in the RPL Process?

Present at an RPL discussion are the RPL facilitator who oversees the process, an assessor who is responsible for the decision about whether RPL can be granted or not, a support person chosen by the applicant, and the applicant. Sometimes the RPL facilitator is also qualified to make the decision about granting RPL.

### For RPL to Work ...

During the consultation stage of the project, Ellen Gapan Gaykamaŋu, from Nungalinya College in Darwin, noted that 'for RPL to work, two cultures will have to meet'. This comment illustrates that cultural diversity is a crucial factor for consideration in the development of RPL for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. It emphasises that if accurate recognition of the skills and knowledge of a member of one cultural group by a member of another is to occur, the processes put in place must ensure that both people understand and accept each other. For this to happen, change will be required, both in the way people think and in the knowledge and understanding they acquire. The cover illustration of this report depicts these changes.

## Culturally Appropriate RPL Assessment

This project is about the RPL process which applies in education and industry for everyone. It is not about developing a new RPL process to meet the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The project does, however, address the fact that RPL processes must be flexible in order to accommodate cultural differences and promote equity.

The project research identified that culturally appropriate approaches to RPL staff development to meet the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people include:

- Training of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as RPL facilitators and assessors in education and the workplace.
- Adequate and appropriate cultural support for RPL applicants. For example, it may be necessary for Elders from the applicant's community to provide this support.
- Adequate and culturally appropriate information about accessing the RPL process and the benefits of RPL for applicants in education, industry and community development.
- Providing the RPL applicant with clear and culturally appropriate explanations of the benchmarks to be used for RPL assessment, including considerations of language requirements.
- Providing flexibility in all aspects of the RPL assessment. For example, there must be consideration for culturally appropriate timing, location, methods of assessment and cultural evidence for RPL claims (including the unique experiences in life, work and formal training/education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples).
- Ensuring that the non-Aboriginal people involved in the RPL process for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are aware and sensitive to the applicant's culture.

A more detailed account of culturally appropriate approaches to RPL staff development can be found in the body of the report.

## Project Findings

As there was very little understanding of full RPL process amongst the participants in the consultations, the project officer provided RPL briefings which highlighted the potential of RPL to enhance recognition of the skills and knowledge of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

The participants then discussed ways RPL could be made culturally appropriate. By the end of each consultation, it became clear to the participants that many culturally appropriate recognition practices were already in existence and that staff require RPL training and guidelines for implementing culturally appropriate RPL to make the process more accessible and equitable for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The project

In relation to good practice in RPL assessment, there was little evidence that RPL available for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples was fully guided by the principles of competence, commitment, access, fairness and support provided by the National Framework for the Recognition of Training (NFROT).

Instead, it was apparent through the research that for RPL to be accessible and equitable as a process, meeting the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples at the local level, there should be culturally appropriate RPL training for those involved.

However, the research identified that there were some practical approaches to recognition already being used in relation to the skills and knowledge of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Many of these approaches were inclusive of culture and have informed the recommendations in this report. For example:

- recognition of work and life experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students during interviews for courses
- acknowledgment of the skills and knowledge of local community people in the design of courses
- recording of the skills and knowledge of students as they progress through training
- customisation of training in industry to include recognition of the skills and knowledge of employees.

The research also found that in instances where there had been some RPL training, culturally appropriate recognition and RPL practices were more likely to exist where:

- there has been support during the process from the local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community for RPL applicants;
- education and industry provider staff are experienced, sensitive and aware of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture at the local level;
- education and industry providers create a supportive environment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and trainees.

The research found that many of the recognition and RPL practices identified are still in the process of being developed or piloted according to the needs and requirements of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities/groups at the local level. The research also uncovered that in many cases, people did not see that their recognition practices might have elements which could be included in the development of an RPL framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Rather, they believed that RPL was something they had yet 'to get a grip on', remaining reluctant to 'start' RPL, and regarding it as a process for which they believe they would require extra time and resourcing. The research also found that there is more likely to be culturally appropriate

**RPL policy development** where RPL processes are being piloted or implemented for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples; that is, policy is being developed in conjunction with practice.

Examples of RPL staff training of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples were identified in South Australia and the Northern Territory. Together, these developments and the outcomes of the consultations and literature search have made up the section of the report entitled 'Approaches to Culturally Appropriate RPL Staff Development'. This section provides approaches to RPL best practice for those establishing RPL for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and groups.

In addition to the RPL best practices gathered for this research amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, some Maori experiences and aspirations with regard to the benefits and use of RPL are contained in the report. They provide an opportunity to reflect upon the RPL good practice strategies developed by another group of indigenous peoples.

### **Barriers to RPL**

The research highlighted a number of barriers to the development of culturally appropriate RPL processes in the NVET system. These have been identified as complex challenges to be met.

As indicated throughout the report, the design of culturally appropriate RPL systems cannot take place outside the context of the current training reforms. Those implementing RPL need to understand competency based training and competency based assessment. Most importantly, competency standards must be meaningful and relevant for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples presenting for training and assessment.

### **Where to from Here?**

The recommendations have been considered by the National Staff Development Committee (NSDC) and the National Federation of Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups (NFAECG). It has been noted that some recommendations are to be referred to other peak national bodies for action. This will require the establishment of strategic links between these bodies and state and territory training systems to examine implementation issues.

The NSDC and the NFAECG have agreed to undertake to monitor the implementation of the recommendations. The strategic links will be negotiated in 1996 to assist with stage two of this project, which is the piloting of culturally inclusive guidelines for RPL facilitators and assessors.

Finally, the report provides advice to the National Staff Development Committee on approaches to RPL staff development as outlined in the objectives of the project. The project findings provide information from which training may be developed to ensure RPL facilitators and assessors have the knowledge and skills to provide culturally appropriate RPL assessment

processes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Effective distribution of this report to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and groups within each state and territory will provide a focus for discussion and decision making about the next stage in the development of the RPL process to suit their specific needs. This will ensure that the goals of participation and decision making in determining educational processes identified in the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy are maintained in the development of RPL.

# 1 Recommendations

This research project was jointly commissioned by the National Staff Development Committee (NSDC) and the National Federation of Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups (NFAECG).

The following recommendations arising from the project research are designed to meet with the goals of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy in relation to the development of RPL. The recommendations have been considered by the NSDC and the NFAECG who have noted that some recommendations are to be referred to other peak bodies for action. This action will require the establishment of strategic links between relevant peak national bodies and state and territory training systems.

## RPL Process

---

A series of recommendations emerged from the research and consultation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. These recommendations focus on staff development to support a culturally inclusive approach to RPL for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

- 1 That cultural diversity within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and groups be recognised to ensure the development of flexible RPL processes which meet the needs of these communities and groups at the local level.
- 2 That training of RPL facilitators and assessors be provided for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples working in the National Vocational Education and Training system.
- 3 That RPL facilitator and assessor training programs in the next stages of this project include:
  - culturally appropriate and flexible assessment methods
  - cultural support during assessment
  - cultural awareness on the part of the RPL facilitator and assessor
  - appropriate language requirements of the benchmark
  - the assessment of language and literacy skills by a language expert
- 4 That a culturally appropriate support person/s be available throughout the RPL process for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander applicant.

- 5 That the support person/s be chosen by the RPL applicant.
- 6 That in order to ensure the RPL process is appropriate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, the nomination of non-Aboriginal RPL facilitators and assessors be accepted by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person or community.
- 7 That the training for RPL facilitators be customised to suit the needs of support persons required to assist Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander RPL applicants.
- 8 That non-Aboriginal RPL facilitators and assessors undertake cultural awareness training which is relevant to the culture of the RPL applicant.
- 9 That prior to the implementation of culturally appropriate RPL at the local community level, a nationally coordinated RPL awareness campaign for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples be conducted.
- 10 That the RPL process used for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander applicants be flexible to reflect the time and effort required to support the application.
- 11 That the development of the cultural awareness training for non-Aboriginal RPL facilitators and assessors give careful consideration to the ability to interpret competencies and learning outcomes in culturally appropriate ways.
- 12 That in areas where knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures are being assessed, Elders and others recognised by the particular Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community be involved with the assessment decision in the RPL process.
- 13 That the National Vocational Education and Training system ensure that the costs for RPL do not disadvantage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.
- 14 That the step-by-step approaches identified by this project be adopted as appropriate RPL processes for RPL assessment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.
- 15 That the step-by-step approaches for the development of appropriate



RPL processes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples be developed into guidelines with accompanying case studies and support materials.

- 16 That the NSDC undertake appropriate marketing of the step-by-step approaches to the development of appropriate RPL assessment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.
- 17 That the elements of RPL good practice and recommended strategies for culturally appropriate RPL training identified in this project be drawn upon to assist with the development of RPL training for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. (Refer to the section on p. 13 of this report for details.)
- 18 That the number of trained Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander RPL facilitators and assessors be increased through targeted training of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander NVET staff.

## **Referral**

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The following recommendations have emerged from the research and consultations and will be referred to the appropriate bodies. The National Staff Development Committee will consult with appropriate agencies to monitor the progress and outcomes of these recommendations.

- 19 That a national Vocational Education and Training conference for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples be held to provide information and discussion of issues on the training reforms as a context within which to understand RPL.
- 20 That information workshops/awareness campaigns on the training reforms be made available to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.
- 21 That Local Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups (LAECG's) and networks use their structures to distribute information about RPL to communities within states and territories.
- 22 That culturally appropriate information about RPL be developed by education providers and industry to promote an understanding of the RPL process by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and trainees.

- 23 That RPL be promoted as an opportunity to recognise skills and knowledge for career path development to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, their communities, and to industry.
- 24 That industries which offer employment to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples/communities provide updated information regarding their organisation's developments in RPL processes and the training reforms.
- 25 That industry training policy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in remote communities be developed, such as that undertaken in the past by the NAEC (National Aboriginal Education Committee).
- 26 That the National Staff Development Committee distribute widely the RPL project report for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.
- 27 That the Standards and Curriculum Council ensure that the NFROT principles adequately include consideration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' cultures so that the entry requirements of courses being presented for accreditation and re-accreditation are accessible to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.
- 28 That explicit reference be made to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures in the development of the 8th Key Competency (Cultural Understandings) and that this matter be referred to the Curriculum Corporation and the Standards and Curriculum Council of ANTA.
- 29 That the Australian Vice-Chancellor's Committee on Credit Transfer consult with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples regarding the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples seeking RPL within the higher education sector.
- 30 That DEET examine the potential for funding a scheme similar to the Aboriginal Tutorial Assistance Scheme (ATAS) to provide Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with support in the carrying out of RPL assessments. This funding should not be means tested. Trained Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander RPL facilitators and assessors could be registered with DEET or the appropriate state training authorities. That training in RPL be provided to these support people.
- 31 That DEET establish guidelines for delivery of accredited courses and

RPL to ensure equity and accessibility for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients in communities including those in remote areas. That these guidelines should be standard practices in all DEET offices.

## **RPL Implementation**

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- 32 That the National Staff Development Committee, in collaboration with the National Federation of Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples Training Advisory Council (ATSIPTAC) and state and territory training systems, develop a strategy for ongoing implementation of the approaches to culturally appropriate RPL staff development identified by this project.
- 33 That the following 'Approaches to Culturally Appropriate RPL Staff Development' for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and groups be made available for consideration by groups and individuals wishing to establish RPL for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and by those piloting RPL in Phase 2 of this project.

## **2 Approaches to Culturally Appropriate RPL Staff Development**

### **2.1 An Approach to the Introduction and Implementation of RPL for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples**

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The following is a step-by-step approach to the development of RPL processes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. It was derived from a synthesis of the information collated from the national consultations and from the literature search for this project. These are the common elements which support existing recognition practices and the development of culturally appropriate RPL for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

#### **Step 1: RPL awareness raising for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and groups**

- State/territory, regional and local offices of DEET, ATSIC, CES etc., TAFE colleges and institutes, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community organisations, private providers etc., distribute culturally appropriate resources to promote RPL consciousness raising for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and groups.
  - These resources may include posters, videos, art and design, leaflets and T-shirts etc. In addition, internal publications and information distribution networks could be utilised.
  - These resources are to provide information about RPL throughout Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and groups to assist with the development and implementation of RPL.
  - Language to be a major consideration in the development of RPL resource materials.

This information will explain:

- what RPL is
- how it might benefit applicants
- what happens in the RPL process
- the current commitment to RPL of the local TAFE college and industries.

The information will emphasise that:

- RPL is a supportive and culturally appropriate practice
- It involves the applicant's local community
- Its benefits relate to the particular requirements of Aboriginal and Torres

### Strait Islander peoples

- It is affirming of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' aspirations and is not assimilationist
- It builds on the culturally appropriate recognition practices already existing
- It is therefore **not** a difficult, culturally unfamiliar and threatening test to be imposed on an individual.

**Note: There is a challenge inherent in the implementation of the RPL process for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. This challenge is not to raise community expectations about the availability of RPL which cannot be met through current practices in the National Vocational Education and Training System (NVETS).**

### Step 2: Selection of participants for RPL training

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities/groups select representatives, either Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal, for RPL facilitator and assessor training. This training will

- be informed by the outcomes of this project relating to requirements of communities/groups based on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples'
  - cultures
  - language/literacy requirements
  - community development priorities;
- be presented by experienced Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander RPL experts and non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander RPL experts who have undertaken cultural awareness training and who are familiar with the outcomes and recommendations of this project; and
- be consistent with the standards of the nationally recognised RPL assessor training program.

### Step 3: RPL trainee responsibilities

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and/or non-Aboriginal participants in the training will:

- identify sections of the mainstream RPL training program for adaptation to suit the cultural requirements of their communities regarding language and literacy, learning styles, cultural concepts, customs/values, lifestyles, historical experiences, cultural activities, cultural protocols, etc.;
- refine the broad RPL framework to encompass these perspectives, within which there will be scope to localise and customise perspectives through

further investigation into local community/group needs; and

- refine the RPL framework to include the **elements of good practice** in RPL assessment identified by this project.

#### **Step 4: Piloting of RPL in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, organisations and other workplaces**

Trained Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Aboriginal RPL facilitators and assessors establish RPL pilot studies in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities/groups. Pilot studies will include:

- Identifying purposes of RPL in the community such as:
  - access to credentialling
  - identification of community skills and knowledge for employment and/or access to training
- Developing culturally appropriate RPL resources (including language) for promotion and implementation of pilot study
- Identifying likely local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander RPL candidates
- Informing potential applicants about process. This will provide information about:
  - benefits of RPL
  - availability and role of cultural support
  - availability and role of RPL facilitator and the assessor
  - range of assessment methods to be negotiated such as discussion, observation, questions, demonstration, gathering of evidence, use of portfolio
  - interpretation of benchmark
- Arrange and/or provide cultural awareness training for non-Aboriginal RPL facilitators and assessors (TAFE and/or industry), and non-Aboriginal support persons.

#### **Step 5: Monitoring and evaluating RPL processes**

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Aboriginal appropriately trained RPL facilitators monitor RPL pilot study and collate outcomes.
- RPL facilitators present outcomes of pilot study to relevant community/groups for discussion, reflection, evaluation.
- Communities/groups spend adequate time to discuss, share and reflect on the RPL process. This will include:
  - discussing and reflecting on real life examples of RPL from pilot study
  - seeing and hearing evidence of how RPL affects applicants, how local employers and TAFE are involved in the process and their degree of commitment to it

- developing an approach for implementing RPL to suit the needs of the community/group

### **Step 6: Ongoing coordination of RPL**

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities/groups elect representatives to follow through with the coordination of RPL activities required which may be:

- Keeping up-to-date with issues relevant to RPL in TAFE, industry and training providers such as:
  - local availability of accredited and non-accredited courses
  - local availability of RPL facilitators and assessors
  - current training reform issues and changes
- Identifying likely RPL candidates in the community
- Collecting real life examples of RPL
- Providing information about:
  - potential benefits of RPL relevant to local community/group
  - detail of the requirements of individuals/groups of the RPL process
  - barriers in the system which block access to the RPL process
- Ensuring that the provision of RPL information is approached with the flexibility required to meet the cultural needs of the community/group such as:
  - time to reflect, to gain knowledge/understanding
  - relate the RPL process to community priorities
- Finding appropriate community support to:
  - attest to an individual/group claim for RPL
  - translate, interpret RPL process and benchmark to ensure cultural inclusivity
  - advise assessor on cultural needs of applicant
- Finding appropriate assessor who will:
  - be available to assess
  - be culturally sensitive
  - explain the benchmark
- Liaising with local TAFE and industry regarding the level of commitment to RPL including:
  - providing cultural awareness training
  - providing culturally appropriate training, delivery and assessment

### **Step 7: Planning for Further Implementation of RPL**

- Community/group to make plans for next stage of RPL implementation. This will include:

- acquiring further RPL information to meet needs of community development
- deciding appropriate format for promoting RPL
- deciding who are potential applicants, RPL assessors and RPL support persons
- Community/group to discuss requirements such as:
  - further expert advice
  - further training
  - further resourcing
  - further information about training, credentialling and employment prospects

## **2.2 Elements of RPL Good Practice and Recommended Strategies to be Included in Approaches to Staff Development for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples**

The following elements of RPL good practice derived from existing recognition practices, from the literature search and the consultations, include suggested strategies to assist with RPL staff development for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and those working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the NVET system.

### **Information**

Strategies to provide adequate and culturally appropriate information about RPL:

- Use style to suit community needs at the local level such as enjoyable, visual, clear, story form and/or step-by-step, formatted information in local language or appropriate English language. (Examples: posters, videos, comic-style paintings, leaflets etc.)
- Give real life examples of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who have accessed the RPL process, such as case studies/stories which show what happened, what the outcome was, how that person/community benefited, what effect RPL is having on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people generally.
- Provide basic information in appropriate format about the training reforms, competency-based training and RPL within these processes including the role of industry, TAFE and other education providers.
- Establish ongoing processes whereby community/groups have time and opportunity to discuss, reflect upon, spread new information, identify effects of RPL and its relevance to community/group priorities, and to determine and develop future RPL activities.



## Support

Strategies to provide adequate and culturally appropriate RPL support:

- Provide option of cultural support person/s e.g. to workshop RPL purpose, identify skills, prepare for assessment, interpret benchmarks, assist with gathering evidence, filling out application form, explaining cultural needs of applicant to non-Aboriginal assessor/employer/training provider, etc.
- Provide option of cultural support person/s for applicant at all stages of the RPL process, i.e. preparation, assessment, post assessment.
- Allow cultural support person/s to speak on behalf of applicant if necessary—language, cultural reasons (e.g. Elder's role).
- Allow cultural support person/s to do questioning if necessary to assist with the RPL assessment, using culturally appropriate language and questioning styles and to assist with choice of assessment methods.
- Allow cultural support to provide evidence for assessment of competence.
- Provide relevant cultural awareness training for non-Aboriginal RPL facilitators to ensure their awareness and sensitivity to, and acceptance by, the local community/group with whom they are working.

## Assessment

Strategies to provide adequate and culturally appropriate assessment:

- Where possible use trained Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander RPL facilitators and assessors.
- Provide cultural awareness training for non-Aboriginal RPL facilitators and assessors.
- Allow assessment to occur in an appropriate location considering the applicant's needs and where evidence to verify the claim for RPL is available.
- Provide flexible approach to timing of assessment to incorporate cultural needs and priorities of community/group (e.g. funerals, ceremonies, activities).
- Use a variety of types of evidence, including competencies gained from unique Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander experiences in work and life.
- Use local Elders to assist with assessment of competence in cultural knowledge.
- Use local community members and Elders as sources of evidence.
- Use local language and/or interpreter (cultural support) if required to assist with: knowledge of process, interpretation of benchmark, gathering and presenting evidence.

- Ensure English language requirements of the benchmark are not unnecessarily restrictive.
- Use benchmarks expressed in ways which are clear and accessible to the applicant.
- Allow cultural support person/s to do questioning during assessment using culturally appropriate language and questioning styles (as with support strategies).
- Allow cultural support person/s to assist with decision about appropriate assessment methods.
- Provide non-threatening, non-adversarial assessment where assessor is supportive and encouraging, assisting RPL applicant to explore whether his or her skills and knowledge match the benchmarks.
- Allow flexible assessment method options to bring out prior learning, including storytelling, group assessment, demonstration/observation, etc.

### **Post Assessment**

In order to provide adequate and culturally appropriate post-RPL assessment information:

- Allow the cultural support person/s to be available to maintain support of the applicant in order to pursue options such as training and employment after RPL assessment has occurred.
- Allow appropriately trained, culturally aware non-Aboriginal RPL facilitators and assessors to be available to maintain support of the applicant (as above).

## **2.3 Examples of RPL Staff Development for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and Others**

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The following two examples consist of best practice approaches similar to those recommended in this report. Together with the other outcomes of the project, these approaches will provide useful guides for RPL staff development in states and territories.

**Note:** Throughout this report, the text in *italics* represents the comments made by participants in the national consultations.

## Example 1

### RPL Assessor Training—Aboriginal Primary Health Care Industry—South Australia

*The Aboriginal Health Council of South Australia which represents the interests of the state's community-based Aboriginal health organisations, has contracted Adelaide Institute of TAFE and Spencer Institute of TAFE to deliver the Certificate in Aboriginal Primary Health Care to Aboriginal Primary Health Care Workers employed in services around South Australia.*

*The method of delivering this course is through the Aboriginal Study Centre Program which provides TAFE courses to Aboriginal students in urban, rural and remote communities. The Study Centre Program offers five vocational award courses through 26 centres in South Australia by open flexible learning methodology.*

*The Centre's courses are delivered by combining elements of face-to-face, conference link, and open learning to provide sufficient flexibility for Aboriginal adult students to successfully complete study. A subject lecturer is located in Adelaide or Port Augusta making contact with students by teleconference, and a local support worker assists the students at the local Study Centre.*

*The curriculum of the Certificate in Aboriginal Primary Health Care has been re-worked into competency format by staff at the Adelaide Institute of TAFE in close consultation with the Aboriginal health industry in South Australia.*

*The Aboriginal Health Care Curriculum Framework contains three Certificates and one Diploma. These four awards meet the requirements of the ASF and AQF and reflect the career structure for Aboriginal Primary Health Care Workers. This structure was developed by the Aboriginal Health Council in consultation with unions, health services and government. The competencies within the Aboriginal Health Worker award are generic and job specific, enabling health service providers to provide skills which best meet their needs. The new curriculum integrates these competencies for Aboriginal Primary Health Care Workers in South Australia.*

*The accreditation was completed in 1995 and meets the NFROT principles which include a process for Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL).*

#### The RPL Process

*Staff at the Adelaide Institute of TAFE in partnership with the Aboriginal Health Council have developed and implemented an RPL process for the Certificate in Aboriginal Primary Health Care.*

*The following principles are paramount to an RPL process with Aboriginal people: empowerment, access and equity. There are four stages in the RPL process:*

- 1 *Senior RPL consultants from the Institute have conducted a two-day RPL assessor training program for 14 Aboriginal health care workers experienced in their field.*
- 2 *The newly trained RPL assessors then conducted half-day RPL information sessions with their own communities for Aboriginal Primary Health Care Workers who are likely RPL candidates. The senior RPL consultants assisted them with this process.*

*At the information sessions, the Aboriginal Primary Health Care Workers are introduced to the RPL process with some background about CBT, RPL and the National Training Reforms. There is some discussion about the value of the knowledge and skills adult people bring to the workplace, and how the process can enable them to meet educational outcomes.*

*The information sessions include a group session followed by one-to-one sessions with potential RPL assesseees to discuss the application and evidence in relevant and greater detail.*

*An RPL application form (including learning outcomes from the course) is given to each person with explanation of how to fill it in and how to match learning outcomes to work and life experiences.*

*The local RPL assessors, as part of their training, act as mentors and support the RPL applicants on a one-to-one basis to enable them to identify competencies they have gained which are relevant to the health care field.*

*The applicant's skills and knowledge from work and life experiences are identified and the process of matching them against the benchmarks is begun.*

- 3 *The next stage is the gathering of evidence for each applicant.*

*Sometimes this is done in groups in which applicants help and support each other. Applicants are encouraged to consider a broad range of evidence such as: observation in the workplace by assessors, validation by workplace supervisor, conversation with and validation by community members.*

*The telephone numbers of the senior RPL consultants are available for further assistance and support with applications and the determination of relevant evidence. A period from 4 to 6 weeks is available for this stage of the process.*

- 4 *The time and date for the RPL assessment of each applicant is organised by the senior RPL consultants.*

*It is crucial the applicant controls the interview process, and organises the location and who will be present for support at the interview.*

*The assessment panel could consist of the support person, one or two senior RPL consultants (one of whom is an assessor) and a trainee RPL assessor from another community. There may be other people from the applicant's Aboriginal community at the interview for support or to validate evidence.*

*The decision to bring a trainee RPL assessor from another community ensures the objectivity and therefore validity and credibility of the RPL assessment. It highlights the equity issues of access and fairness fundamental to the goals of the National Aboriginal Education Policy. It also emphasises the quality of the assessment conducted in relation to a national award.*

### Some Issues

- *The new RPL assessors undergo ongoing assessment of their competence as RPL assessors, by the senior RPL consultants. The purpose of this is to alleviate any uncertainty experienced by the trainees.*
- *The RPL assessment is conducted in a culturally sensitive way with consideration of the learning and communication styles of Aboriginal people. The non-Aboriginal people on the panel must be experienced and respectful of Aboriginal culture.*

### Summary

This study highlights:

- The potential for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to be trained in RPL in a culturally appropriate way.
- The potential for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to have access to the credentials required for employment in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander primary health care.
- The need for service delivery to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to be culturally relevant and therefore meet the needs of those communities as a result of access to training and assessment by appropriately skilled people.
- The features of this RPL training program relevant to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander RPL facilitator and assessor trainees, which are that:
  - support for applicants meets cultural needs
  - there is group learning and assessment
  - non-Aboriginal trainers devolve the process to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples
  - there is an ongoing evaluation of the process whereby Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are able to monitor its effectiveness
  - there is ongoing expert advice about the process available to trainees
  - assessment methods are culturally appropriate.

## Example 2

### RPL Assessor Training—Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples in the Northern Territory

The following paper, describing two-day RPL workshops, 'Considerations for Staff Development for RPL', was developed by staff now based at the Aboriginal Development Unit in the Northern Territory.

#### Brief Presentation

*The time spent on the overview of RPL is short and staged and led by an informed presenter. Case studies are available to be presented as examples of what works and what doesn't work.*

#### Small Groups With Directed Tasks, Working Simultaneously

*The stages, discussed in small groups, where group members are asked to share ideas about:*

##### Task 1

- *Style of dissemination of RPL information/marketing that will work in their workplace and/or on their community.*

##### Task 2

- *Marketing information that captures images of a specific workplace or community and summarises the advantages of RPL, brochures, audio-tape etc. The text should include written information and graphics appropriate to specific workplaces, industries, enterprises (generic brochures do not always work). Audio-tapes should be supported with and linked to graphics.*

##### Task 3

- *Competency-based curriculum design: An exploration and critiquing of modules to identify and predict difficulties applicants could encounter as they engage with the technical discourse packed into CBT documents. For example, demystifying vocational education/training jargon.*

##### Task 4

- *Compiling an RPL profile: Counselling including strategies to assist RPL applicants apply for RPL for particular workplaces.*

*Drawing from 'buddy' system, mentor, support person, RPL adviser etc.*

##### Task 5

- *RPL assessment strategies: A discussion on most suitable style of assessment considering, culture of applicant, language and literacy skills, knowledge of CBT jargon, competencies being assessed, location of assessment, formal/informal etc.*

### **Task 6**

- *Reporting strategies: To the applicant, to the workplace, databases, design and issue of certification, etc.*

*Offer interactive learning opportunities rather than a lecture style delivery early in the workshop. Participants' findings are recorded onto summary sheets and shared between the whole group.*

### **Content**

*In the two-day workshops we conduct in the NT for RPL Assessor Training, particularly where we are targeting RPL Assessors for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients/students, we dedicate most of the time to exploring two aspects of applying for RPL:*

#### **Demystifying Vocational Education and Training Terms for RPL Applicants**

*Initially we critique a module as a framework for CBT curriculum design and ensure participants of the workshop know, understand and use key technical terms comfortably—learning outcomes, assessment criteria, competencies etc. This takes about two hours of 'round table discussion'.*

#### **Preparing the RPL Evidence Profile**

*The remainder of the workshop involves the participants selecting a module appropriate to their workplace for a hypothetical RPL application (sometimes people use real applications). In small groups they model the RPL process and role-play an interview. The entire process is written up, as a case study, and submitted two weeks later for assessment.*

*Then we discuss and suggest culturally appropriate strategies to assist the applicants map their life and work experience competencies to the learning outcomes/competencies in modules—how to develop an RPL evidence profile. Oral accounts and story telling are important to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student.*

*The role play included preparation for an interview, or other assessment technique.*

*Debriefing at the conclusion of the workshop includes presentations of things that worked well and things that were difficult.*

### **Learning outcomes**

*On completion of this training program participants will be able to:*

- 1 *Describe theoretical features of RPL that facilitate assessment of knowledge or skills no matter where, when or how the learning occurred.*
- 2 *Identify stages in the RPL assessment process.*
- 3 *Assist applicants to compile an evidence profile, engaging with CBT/VET jargon. Practice in using evidence profile to describe own competencies.*



- 4 *Apply appropriate RPL assessment methods through role-play that assess competencies of applicants in specified areas.*
- 5 *Finalise a decision about assessment of an RPL applicant and implement recording procedures.*

## Summary

This case study addresses the cultural styles of learning and communicating of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The approach:

- utilises an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander custom of group learning and group support
- attends to the importance of demystifying the RPL process by using local Aboriginal English and picture references to how RPL works
- uses references to local community people and places
- refers to training in the context of the goals of community development
- uses flexible assessment methods
- emphasises discussion rather than the written word
- provides basic knowledge about the use of competency-based curriculum to give RPL assessor/facilitators the context within which the RPL process is situated.



### 3 Project Background and Methodology

#### Aims of the Project

**Recognition of Prior Learning for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples** is a project which has the following main aims:

- to document existing good practice in RPL assessment and RPL facilitator training for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and groups.
- to provide information on culturally appropriate RPL processes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the national vocational education and training system.
- to advise the National Staff Development Committee on an approach for training of RPL facilitators and assessors (both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal) working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander RPL applicants.

The report's findings have been analysed in the context of the goals of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy (NATSIEP). These goals are based on principles of achieving equity of access to educational services, involvement in educational decision making, equity of educational participation, and the achievement of equitable and appropriate educational outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

This report illustrates and analyses a range of existing processes and practices which affect recognition of the skills and knowledge of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. It highlights issues, concerns and priorities relevant to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in relation to RPL and recognition.

The project findings emerged from a literature search and national consultations with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and others working with them in the NVET system. The information gathered gives shape to the context for potential development of culturally relevant RPL processes.

Case studies illustrate RPL as it currently exists and highlight issues relevant to considerations for RPL staff development.

The Appendix consists of additional case studies and further details arising from case studies contained within the report.

The information in the report is supported with findings from a literature search into practices relating to recognition and assessment for indigenous groups, both in Australia and overseas.

A review of RPL policies and procedures in states and territories is presented to identify the potential areas of support they provide for equity groups as well as the potential barriers which appear to exist in the state/territory systems.

An analysis is provided of the information collated, drawing it together to emphasise the good practice approaches to recognition and RPL already existing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The report highlights the potential for further development of existing 'recognition' practices to ensure they are culturally appropriate and in line with the goals of the NATSIER.

The recommendations inform the development of culturally appropriate RPL processes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and staff development initiatives to fulfil these needs.

### **3.1 Background/Context**

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#### **3.1.1 The Project**

This project was identified by the National Staff Development Committee in collaboration with the National Federation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Consultative Groups as part of a process to assist staff in the NVET to provide culturally appropriate services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who apply for Recognition of Prior Learning.

A national conference of key stakeholders was held in March 1994 in Canberra. Delegates at the conference agreed that RPL is critical for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people because it is a process which acknowledges indigenous peoples' existing skills, and creates educational and vocational pathways which were previously unavailable. It was further agreed that current RPL assessor training could be enhanced to ensure that RPL assessment is culturally appropriate and readily available to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

As emphasised in the objectives of the NATSIER, the requirements of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are increased employment, education and training opportunities.

#### **3.1.2 Employment, Education and Training for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples**

In recent years, there has been a number of initiatives directed at improved access to training for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy has assisted by promoting increases in access to accredited courses in both education and industry as well as creating opportunities for the bridging of gaps in basic education.

In some states, TAFE Aboriginal liaison officers and Aboriginal education units provide support to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, advice to teachers on cultural issues, and liaison with local communities and Aboriginal community organisations to ensure vocational training courses are relevant to local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and that there is improved access to mainstream courses.

There are increasing numbers of accredited courses designed specifically for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in areas of cultural interest and significance. These courses identify clear pathways to further study and employment opportunities. Some examples of these are in the areas of art and design, tourism, hospitality, cultural heritage, welfare, small business and management.

Articulation arrangements between these courses and mainstream courses are obviously crucial for the future career paths and employment prospects of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Aboriginal industry training boards have been established around the country to advise governments on course provision, to ensure accredited courses are relevant to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander interests and prospects for employment, as well as to establish local and regional employment opportunities.

### **3.1.3 Competency and Recognition—Relevance to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples**

In the 1990s, with the changing industrial climate, there is an impetus for credentialling in areas where, previously, having work experience and not necessarily credentials was generally acceptable. The drive to make Australian industry internationally more competitive with a skilled and competent workforce has become a national priority and industries have developed national competency standards to facilitate this.

The movement towards establishing competency standards has brought about an emphasis on assessing competence as opposed to a reliance on paper qualifications to establish capability. This development can be seen at a national level in industry and in the vocational education and training sectors. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are likely candidates to benefit from this system which allows for the acknowledgment of competencies no matter where or when they were obtained.

In the context of the competency movement the National Framework for Recognition of Training (NFROT) has developed guidelines to assist the development of nationally consistent recognition practices. The model for Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) endorsed by the Victorian State Training System in 1990 is consistent with the principles of NFROT. The RPL

framework is now used widely at a national level within both education and industry sectors.

The RPL process is a major facilitator for achieving the aims and recommendations of competency-based training.

Changes to the workplace are likely to have an impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples whose education/training opportunities have been so poor. Through access to RPL, appropriate training is more likely to be identified and made available by industry where there is concern for more effective and efficient utilisation of training expenditure. Accessibility and availability of the RPL process to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples will enhance prospects for training and education through the NVET system.

### **3.1.4 RPL—Benefits to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples**

The advantages of RPL include:

- acknowledgment of the full range of an individual's skills and knowledge in relation to requisite benchmarks
- identification of skills and knowledge and/or competencies for the purposes of choosing career paths, appropriate training, and for seeking satisfying and/or available employment
- the reduction in training time required by the applicant who is granted RPL in relation to a training program or course of study
- avoidance of duplicating learning for those granted RPL.

As there are many culturally, socially and economically diverse contexts in which to appropriately apply recognition practices for the benefits of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, adequate consultation and negotiation with communities at the local level in the development of programs is crucial to successful RPL implementation. This approach is stipulated by government education policy in partnership with the NATSIEP.

With access to culturally appropriate RPL processes, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples will benefit from the recognition of their skills and knowledge for the purposes of increasing access to training and improving prospects for employment.

Culturally appropriate RPL processes will ensure that recognition is granted for the skills and knowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have gained through their unique life experiences (Aboriginal community involvement, survival skills relating to government policy impact on lifestyles, health, education, employment etc.); their work experiences (in the community, in community organisations, in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identified positions in public and private employment, and in

mainstream employment positions); and their formal education and training backgrounds.

The knowledge, skills, experience and cultural richness of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who live and work in many different environments are valuable resources for this country's development. Recognition practices in the form of RPL will therefore provide an opportunity for a greater and more equitable realisation of the potential offered by this group.

### **3.2 Methodology**

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The project was designed to ensure that the control and ownership of the project's outcomes were devolved nationally to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people involved with the project, and through them, to the broader Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community.

The findings from the research examined in this report were identified through national consultations with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and a search into literature found in Australia and overseas. The project was conducted in the following stages:

#### **National Project Reference Group**

Establishment of a national project reference group to provide ongoing advice, assistance and direction to the project team.

This group was nominated by the National Federation of Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups in its capacity to provide advice to the National Staff Development Committee on issues central to the education and training needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

#### **Literature Search**

Through a literature search, examples of RPL policy, RPL best practice and relevant experiences in recognition, assessment and training in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and other indigenous groups from overseas were collated and examined.

This material was used as background information from which preparation for the national consultation stage of the project was made.

#### **State/Territory Contact Persons**

The project reference group members selected an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander contact person in each state and territory. This person was invited to be committed to the project for three full weeks or six weeks part time,

whichever would be the most appropriate time to organise the consultations within their state or territory.

## Organising Consultations

Each contact person selected appropriate people from education and industry in both urban and rural areas within their respective state or territory to form focus groups representing communities involved in the NVET system. In addition, each contact person identified key people within their state or territory for consultation.

The contact persons organised the time, venue, catering, travel and accommodation arrangements for people within their state or territory to meet with the project officer for group or individual consultation.

With the exception of two states, consultations took place in the capital city and one other centre. In the Northern Territory and Tasmania, the contact person arranged for the project officer to visit a number of centres to consult with people, rather than bring people together in a focus group in one particular place.

## The Consultations

The focus group members consisted of representatives from the following areas:

- community members and Elders
- state AECGs
- local AECGs
- TAFE colleges
- private providers (cooperatives, community organisations, industries)
- local industry
- adult and community education providers
- tertiary education
- public sector employers
- prison education
- ATSIC regional councillors
- DEET training/employment officers
- others

The consultations took the form of informal meetings for sharing and exchanging information. RPL briefings were provided by the project officer and materials about RPL were distributed amongst the participants.

The consultations ensured that the focus groups and others had a basic understanding of the RPL process in the context of the national training reforms.

The participants in the consultations informed the project officer of issues, priorities and concerns about RPL likely to affect their communities/sectors. They provided reference to RPL practices and case studies, and other existing recognition practices.

### **Documentation of Outcomes**

The project officer documented the outcomes of the consultations with assistance from the contact persons, focus group participants and project reference group members. The outcomes were returned to the people involved in the consultations for reflection, further comments and correction.

A one-day meeting of the project reference group was held in Melbourne to discuss the outcomes of the project presented to them as a first draft of the project report. Draft recommendations to the National Staff Development Committee and the National Federation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Consultative Groups were included in the report.

Changes to the draft report and recommendations, suggested by the project reference group, have been included.



## 4 The Impact of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' Cultures on the Requirements of Assessment and RPL

*We know by observing ... what we see. You know, by having pieces of paper (qualifications) ... We are in charge of the time; you are ruled by time, the clock. ... For RPL to work, two cultures will have to meet.*

Ellen Gapan Gaykamaŋu, Nungalinya College, Darwin, NT

The cultural richness and diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and groups is a central consideration in the development of any process designed to meet their needs. Cultural considerations important in the RPL process have emerged from the consultations. These are, broadly:

- Learning styles
- Cultural perspectives
- Culture and life styles
- Language/literacy
- Customs/values

To simply say 'assessment' or 'recognition' and to expect there to be basic agreement on process, purpose and outcomes would be to underestimate the wide variety of cultural perspectives amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

In the assessment of competencies of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, there may be any number of cultural considerations which are critical to valid and reliable assessment. The information and case studies which follow illustrate this issue.

### 4.1 Culture and Assessment

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#### 4.1.1 Culturally Appropriate Questioning Techniques

In NSW the participants in the consultations said that the questions during the RPL interview should be *open* to accommodate the cultural needs and learning styles of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander applicants, *focusing on the peripheral aspects of the applicant's knowledge first. To start RPL, a broad question could be asked, 'How do you find your work (in the organisation)?'*

This method of questioning was described in the following way:

*This kind of questioning is like a pelican when it is landing. The pelican makes a wide circle in the air when he is about to land, and as he gets closer to the sea or ground, his circles get gradually smaller, until he finally lands. This is how we should do our RPL questions.*



### 4.1.2 Culturally Appropriate Methods of Assessment

Jill Byrnes, in 'Aboriginal Learning Styles and Adult Education: Is a Synthesis Possible?' (1993), describes 'elements of an Aboriginal pedagogy' suggested by Aboriginal students from Batchelor College in the Northern Territory. The following of these 'elements' directly relate to ensuring methods of assessment reflect the learning styles of those being assessed:

- *Using the Elders as a curriculum resource or curriculum 'text'*
- *Teaching by demonstration—the teacher becomes a participant as distinct from an instructor*
- *Communicating in the local language or in Aboriginal English*
- *Arranging for the teaching to be carried out in a place appropriate to the knowledge to be taught, not solely or always in the classroom*
- *Encouraging co-operative group work and self-directed learning*

### 4.1.3 Culturally Appropriate RPL Assessment

The following RPL case study from the Northern Territory shows the importance of considering the learning styles and cultural needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander applicants when conducting RPL assessment.

#### ***Case Study 1: Remote Communities Retail Store Program***

*Three women who work in the store on Bathurst Island, NT, sought RPL for some modules in the Remote Communities Retail Store Program—a certificate course.*

*The RPL process was conducted by three people—the RPL facilitator (Aboriginal), an assessor and the RPL consultant from the Aboriginal Development Unit in Darwin. The assessment took place in the store.*

*The women were interviewed together—they asked for it to be done this way. Support was provided through the group process with individuals supporting statements and providing evidence of each other's competencies. On-site evidence was available when clarification was necessary.*

*Questioning techniques were selected carefully. At one stage several questions were re-shaped because the answers supplied were incorrect. For example, do you use the telephone? The answer was no. The assessors knew this to be untrue and drew on community examples of situations to elicit more detailed information about the applicant's competencies. The applicant who had answered no to the closed question, soon acknowledged that she did use the telephone, and gave examples of her competence in that area.*

*There were no written references. The evidence was mostly oral from the store manager and workers in the store. Other evidence was provided in workplace documents (spreadsheets, pay documents, orders etc.) when they were relevant to the learning outcomes in the modules.*

*Two of the women need to complete a computer module and an OH & S module. The third applicant was granted 100% RPL, the first credential she has ever received. The assessors are in the process of identifying appropriate courses for her to undertake.*

This case study shows how the following cultural factors are important for RPL:

- group learning and group support
- co-opting involvement of community members
- providing culturally appropriate assessment, that is, allowing for demonstration of competence on-the-job or through observation.

#### 4.1.4 Developing Culturally Appropriate RPL Assessment

Staff at the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Corporation for Health, Education and Training, a Brisbane-based community provider, expressed concerns relating to the cultural requirements of their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student RPL applicants.

They said that, where there is inadequate understanding on the part of the RPL assessor of the culture and learning styles of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, there is a risk that RPL assessment will not be valid and reliable.

They raised the following issues:

- *How to develop culturally appropriate benchmarks for assessment. How can the health worker industry competency standards be implemented so that they relate to the diverse cultural nature of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander primary health care industry?*
- *How to have culturally appropriate assessors of competence available for RPL assessment. Non-Aboriginal trainees delivering the courses have to be culturally sensitive and be acknowledged by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health industry as capable of both delivering the course and assessing competence in a culturally appropriate way.*

### 4.1.5 Best Practice—Culturally Appropriate RPL Staff Development

An example from the Northern Territory, of a best practice approach to RPL, was developed by the Aboriginal Development Unit in the Northern Territory. It incorporates a number of cultural considerations, including learning styles, into RPL training for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

This RPL assessor training program is flexible and provides for both non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander RPL trainees. (Refer to p. 23 for a summary of this staff development program, entitled 'Considerations for Staff Development'.)

### Conclusion

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' RPL assessment requirements may include:

- co-opting of community members (including Elders) into the assessment process
- attention to individual/group learning
- consideration of language/literacy
- availability of culturally appropriate benchmarks
- availability of assessors trained in cultural awareness if they are non-Aboriginal.

## 4.2 Cultural Perspectives Affecting Assessment

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Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' perspectives relating to:

- time
- place
- cultural priorities, including survival
- value and meaning

may differ markedly from non-Aboriginal perspectives, as indicated by participants in the consultations. The following examples of these differences were expressed during the consultations across the country.

### 4.2.1 Time

- *The achievement of a task or process is what counts, not the time it may take. Time is not always an issue for Aboriginal people.*
- *It may not be possible to stick to a schedule for RPL assessment due to community/family commitments. This was indicated in the RPL pilot study conducted for remote communities in Far North Queensland (see p. 58).*

- *Making plenty of time available is an important consideration for knowing how to introduce and implement RPL for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. The process, its benefits and relevance must be understood and accepted. Communities will require time to reflect on their priorities and appropriate strategies for the process amongst themselves.*
- *Time is necessary to enable communities to get used to each stage of the RPL process, from accepting and understanding the relevance of RPL, to identifying skills and their relationship to benchmarks, to gathering appropriate evidence for assessment, and to having the appropriate cultural support with the process.*
- *Adequate time and support is required to gather records (e.g. letters, references) as evidence to support claims for RPL.*

#### 4.2.2 Place

- *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people may not want to leave their community for training or for RPL. An RPL assessment may have to take place on familiar ground or somewhere where there is community backing available. Often an office is not suitable.*

#### 4.2.3 Cultural Priorities

- *Family and community responsibilities are important reasons not to be available to leave the community for training and/or assessment.*
- *The RPL process will need to be flexible enough to allow time for the cultural requirements of a community, such as meetings, ceremonies, family, which may take priority over all other activities, including training and assessment.*

#### 4.2.4 Value and Meaning

- *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people may not consider the skills and knowledge they are gaining through training, or those they have gained through work and life experiences, are significant as skills on their own. It may be more appropriate for competencies to be regarded as having been acquired by the group, for the purpose of the group.*

(For further illustration of the importance of providing appropriate time and other cultural considerations for communities to develop the RPL process, refer to the RPL pilot study conducted in Far North Queensland on p. 58.)

#### 4.2.5 Culture and Lifestyles

This includes health, family, community, birth, death, ceremony, activities, socio-historical experiences (including poverty, loss, dispossession, racism, etc.).

The unique socio-historical background of an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person's experiences and the cultural context in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people live today are important considerations for designing appropriate assessment methods, including RPL. Often, this information is not known by non-Aboriginal people.

The following excerpt from an RPL case study, 'Nelly' from NSW, illustrates the impact of an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person's cultural/social background on her RPL assessment:

### ***Case Study 2: Nelly—NSW***

*Many of Nelly's skills and knowledge were gained during her working life through having to find out ways to do things and to complete tasks. At work, she experienced what it is like to be the only Aboriginal person in her immediate surroundings. She had to force herself to be confident enough to speak up to people in positions of authority.*

*In her childhood, Nelly lived on an Aboriginal mission. There she learned to believe that people who are qualified in education have an advantage over others and that it would be unlikely that she would ever gain a qualification. She had to make a real effort to overcome this perception of herself.*

*Later in her life, when Nelly came into the workforce, her job was advertised specifically for an Aboriginal person. No formal qualifications were required. In the job she was on the same salary as her qualified non-Aboriginal counterparts. Their jealousy and anger about this difference in treatment, led them to make racist and hurtful comments to her.*

*Later, when Nelly was granted RPL based on the knowledge and skill she had acquired in her work experience, she received another bout of racist comments. She had to console herself by remembering that if TAFE had accepted the learning outcomes of her prior experiences, then she must be OK, even if other students didn't think so.*

*Now that Nelly has completed her course and has her formal qualifications to prove it, she feels stronger in her belief in herself and her abilities in the workplace. As an Aboriginal person, Nelly has appreciated the fact that the RPL process acknowledges the skills and knowledge gained by Aboriginal people.*

(Additional detail about this case study can be found on p. 45 and again on p.123 in the Appendix.)

This case study shows the importance of:

- unique Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander experiences in work and life situations through which valuable competencies are developed
- cultural sensitivity required of the RPL assessor to ensure full recognition of these competencies.

#### 4.2.6 Age and Gender

The age and gender of RPL applicants will also have a determining effect on assessment approaches. Refer to case study on page 70 for an example of this.

### Conclusion

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' perspectives relating to time, place, values, priorities, lifestyle, age, gender and socio-cultural experiences must be taken into consideration in the development and implementation of RPL.

### 4.3 Language/Literacy

For many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, standard English will be a second, third, fourth or more language. For some, Aboriginal English is an appropriate language. Considerations must be made about language barriers in assessment to ensure the applicant is not disadvantaged.

#### 4.3.1 Oracy

The following factors relating to language impacting on RPL processes were expressed by participants in all stages during the consultations:

- *It may not be appropriate to conduct an assessment in standard English merely because it is the language of the assessor. An interpreter may have to present.*
- *It may be difficult due to discomfort or shyness for an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person to be in a discussion with a non-Aboriginal person, especially if that person is not known to them.*
- *It may be language barriers which make an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander RPL applicant reluctant to talk—not lack of knowledge. For example,*

#### **Case Study 3**

*An RPL applicant from a remote community who, when asked a direct*



*question about his work skills for assessment purposes, did not answer and walked away because of the way he was addressed.*

- *If no response or monosyllabic answers to queries pose difficulties with the assessment for the RPL assessor, a support person who knows the applicant should be available.*
- *Interpretation of the learning outcomes may need to occur between the RPL applicant and an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander support person prior to the assessment. This will assist assessments when there are language barriers.*
- *Words do not have to be a necessary part of an RPL assessment of practical skills. Many people can communicate clearly without words and an assessor should be aware of this. For example,*

#### ***Case Study 4***

*The construction worker 'Frank' in Milingimbi met the assessor in his work area to be assessed. There was no need to engage in a technical discussion to identify his competencies.*

(See p. 123 for further detail regarding Frank's RPL assessment and issues concerning RPL implementation in remote communities.)

## **Conclusion**

These references to language show that language is an important consideration for RPL and can be addressed by ensuring:

- flexibility in methods of assessment
- availability of cultural support
- cultural awareness of the RPL facilitator and the assessor.

### **4.3.2 Literacy**

The comments cited in the previous section (4.3.1) relate mainly to the requirement for those conducting the RPL process to address language issues to ensure the applicant has full access to the process. It is also necessary to consider English language literacy skills as an important component of the language requirements of the RPL assessment.

An individual's English language literacy skills will affect access to information about RPL and the explanation of the benchmark. The level of literacy will affect the applicant's ability to prepare an RPL application form and collect evidence to support an application. Importantly, it may also affect an individual's knowledge of the vocational education and training system and therefore any opportunities that the system may offer.

The following information obtained from the literature search relates to literacy issues affecting the development of RPL:

- Consultation amongst non-English Speaking Background (NESB) students in English as a Second Language programs was carried out by the Recognition and Assessment Centre at Kangan Institute of TAFE as part of the project *RPL—Practical Guides for NESB Clients and Assessors*. This project found that people from NESB preferred initial information about RPL in their first language to enable them to understand the concept of skills recognition in Australia.

The above project also proposed a range of strategies for RPL facilitators, assessors and staff involved in supporting the RPL process. Language and literacy issues were highlighted as important.

- There is considerable debate in industry and education nationally about whether language and literacy skills should be explicitly stated in competency standards (see *Making Skills Count: Recognition of Prior Learning for Non-English Speaking Background Applicants—A Practical Guide to Assist RPL Assessors and Support Staff to Implement RPL*, Appendix 3.2, English Language Competence, Recognition and Assessment Centre, Kangan Institute of TAFE).

The above project recommended that where literacy and language skills are assessed during the RPL process this must be carried out by the relevant person—a language expert, who is skilled in assessing spoken and written language. The applicant must also be clearly informed about the language requirements of the benchmark.

- It is also particularly important not to inflate the language requirements of the benchmark or to assume that there is a 'standard' to be achieved prior to accessing the RPL process. Assumptions like these on the part of the assessor, RPL facilitator and staff supporting the RPL process may have a negative effect on access to the RPL process for a range of potential applicants.



As Clare Burton points out in *Equity Principles in Competency Standards: Development and Implementation*, in Equity in Assessment Principle 1, '... people of different cultural backgrounds are in the best position to advise on how cultural and language barriers might impede the fairness of assessment procedures' (p. 28). Burton cites an example from the Dietetics profession where a skills test 'purported to test counselling skills but ... in fact tested a knowledge of English' (p. 21).

Similarly, in Equity in Assessment Principle 5, 'The mode of assessment should not place unnecessary additional demands on employees that may inhibit or prevent a candidate from showing what they know and understand'.

In their report on the implementation of competency based training and assessment for people from non-English speaking backgrounds—*One Size Fits Some* (DEET 1995)—Giselle Mawer and Laurie Field examine the language/literacy issues which impact on assessment. They point out that 'the choice of method used to assess prior learning is crucial for NESB people. Some assessment methodologies are more discriminatory than others in terms of the language and literacy requirements. As a VEETAC evaluation report on the role of RPL in the hospitality industry noted: "Unless English language proficiency is a critical occupational competency, RPL services need to incorporate techniques that minimise reliance on English language competence"' (p. 57).

## Conclusion

- It would be timely for the Standards and Curriculum Council to monitor the development and evaluation of competency standards and related curriculum and training to maximise access for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with particular regard to the language and literacy issues identified in this report. This monitoring process would ensure that any associated language/literacy requirements of the assessee are those which are actually integral to the competency standards.
- Literacy and language skills should be assessed during the RPL process by a language expert.
- The language requirements of the benchmark should not be inflated during the RPL assessment.
- A language 'standard' should not be imposed prior to RPL.
- Literacy skills affect access to information about RPL, particularly in relation to the benefits of RPL and the interpretation of the benchmark.

## 4.4 Requirements for RPL Assessment

All groups in the consultations emphasised the importance of providing appropriate cultural support to uphold the cultural values, knowledge and customary behaviour of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander RPL applicants. They said that at least one person from the applicant's community who knows them, should be available for support throughout the process.

### 4.4.1 Provide a Culturally Appropriate Environment

The two case studies Nelly and Jane show the importance of providing a culturally sensitive and supportive environment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander RPL applicants.

#### Nelly

In the following excerpt, continued from the previous NSW case study, the environment was not supportive for Nelly which meant she was disadvantaged during the RPL process.

#### *Case Study 2 (continued): Nelly—NSW*

*Nelly was granted RPL and able to proceed into the second year of a course in TAFE.*

*In the first phase of the RPL process, the teachers gave Nelly a booklet containing the learning outcomes of the course. She was asked to identify her prior learning in relation to each learning outcome. She found this kind of self-assessment difficult to do without support. It felt like a test.*

*Nelly believes that many people both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal do not know how to identify their skills and knowledge from a wide range of work and unique life experiences. She had to ring the teachers constantly to check whether she was doing this correctly. Her uncertainty and lack of confidence made her feel that RPL was a difficult process. She was definitely needing some support at this stage.*

(Additional details about this case study can be found on p. 40 and again on p. 123 in the Appendix.)

This case study shows:

- the requirements of a culturally supportive environment to assist with the RPL process
- the need for culturally sensitive RPL facilitators in that environment.

## Jane

The case study **Jane** is from an Aboriginal Studies Unit at a higher education institution in the Northern Territory. Jane's assessment was facilitated by appropriate cultural support.

### *Case Study 5: Jane—NT*

*Jane is from an Aboriginal community in the Northern Territory where she grew up and attended school. She left secondary school after a couple of years.*

*Since that time Jane has had a wide variety of experiences in Aboriginal education which is reflected in her employment history, her personal achievements, her published writing and her representation on advisory councils and committees. She was previously employed as an Aboriginal community adult educator and worked in Aboriginal health promotions.*

*Her involvement in the arts led to a number of published articles, song writing awards and a NAIDOC award. Jane has also been involved as a member, president and chairperson of various advisory councils and committees in areas of health, arts, language, education, legal aid and on health councils.*

*Jane enrolled in a teacher training course while she was currently working as an Aboriginal Liaison Officer with a government department. The senior lecturer explained the process and benefits of RPL to her and after two more meetings Jane was able to present support material that provided an impressive profile on her working life and life experiences.*

*The RPL assessment occurred in a non-threatening environment (in this case the higher education institution) which aims to provide ongoing support for the cultural requirements of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. The RPL assessors were non-Aboriginal people (in this case lecturers) who were known and trusted by the applicant.*

*Jane was granted RPL equivalent to 35% of the course.*

This case study shows:

- the importance of a culturally supportive environment and culturally aware RPL facilitators and assessors.

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#### 4.4.2 Provide Culturally Appropriate Support

- Participants in the Northern Territory described the importance of cultural support, emphasising the supportive role of the Elders and the group in the RPL process:

*Aboriginal applicants will need to be fully at ease with the RPL process, fully understand it and be comfortable with it, before they will access it.*

*This can be done by Aboriginal people workshoping the concept together, learning about it together and helping each other with identifying their own skills.*

*Once Aboriginal people know how to 'do RPL' then it will take off and it will help Aboriginal people get jobs and training.*

*If this is not part of the RPL process, then there will be fears and shame that RPL is too hard, they won't be able to do it, and that it won't be any good.*

*It may not be comfortable for an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person to be interviewed on his or her own. This may cause shyness. It may be more appropriate to conduct assessment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in groups.*

*It may not be culturally appropriate for an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person to claim competence. It may be the place of an Elder or community person (or more) to speak on behalf of the trainee.*

*A high level of support for RPL applicants is usually crucial to ensure communication can take place. Community members, including Elders may be a crucial part of the assessment.*

- At a TAFE institute in Brisbane, a cultural support person for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students was already available.

*An Aboriginal teacher working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students was a community Elder whose role it was to ensure that the skills and knowledge of the students would be recognised in relation to the courses being delivered.*

*This support was a traditional role already being fulfilled. It resembles the role of the support person in the RPL process.*

- Participants in the consultations from the ACT expressed the need for appropriate support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander applicants seeking recognition for their skills and knowledge during recruitment interviews as well as RPL assessments. They said:

*RPL processes including interactive, non-threatening, supportive methods of assessment should be promoted as a method by which recruitment tests for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people can be handled in industry, public service, TAFE, etc.*

*Assessment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people should always incorporate interaction and appropriate support and ensure the valuing/empowering of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander applicant.*

- In NSW, the focus group made the following suggestions about providing cultural support for the applicant in relation to the benchmark:

*The RPL support person (Aboriginal Elder or community person) would need to have a clear understanding of:*

- the purpose of RPL assessment, and
- the assessor's (usually non-Aboriginal) understanding of the benchmark.

*In cases where cultural awareness is lacking, the assessor could meet with the Aboriginal support person prior to the RPL assessment. The meeting would ensure the benchmark is presented clearly to the support person.*

*If necessary, during the RPL interview, the support person could do most of the questioning, using culturally appropriate language and questioning styles to draw out the applicant's competency. The non-Aboriginal assessor's role might then be to listen rather than be responsible for the questioning.*

*This method is similar to a practice in schools in which Aboriginal Education Assistants are advocates for Aboriginal students, helping counsellors to identify the student's problem, and to get him or her back into the classroom.*

*An Aboriginal mentor would assist the RPL applicant during the earlier phases of the RPL process. Ideally, the same person would act as the applicant's advocate during the interview phase.*

- In South Australia, the RPL process developed in the delivery of the Certificate of Aboriginal Primary Health Care, emphasises the importance for RPL applicants to bring with them community members and Elders for support. In some cases, it is the Elders who are responsible for claiming recognition for a particular person, on behalf of that person.

Further information about this case study can be found on page 20.

- The following case study, Bill from Victoria, is another example illustrating the importance of recognising the applicant's cultural background in the assessment of competencies. The case study also highlights that relevant cultural support can help to translate skills acquired from one cultural environment to another, and to draw out the applicant's skills and knowledge.

#### ***Case Study 6: Bill—Victoria***

*Bill applied for RPL in the belief that his work experience had already provided him with the skills outlined in the course description.*

*Bill's RPL application provided clear evidence of the extent of his work experience. He had developed skills working with the Aboriginal community as a community worker and in official capacities in Aboriginal organisations. He had also worked in private industry as a clerk and with the railways as a station assistant. He worked as a counsellor in a youth training centre, a manager in a youth hostel, an Aboriginal drug and alcohol counsellor in a government department and later as an employment consultant for Aboriginal people in another government department.*

*At the RPL interview Bill elaborated further on the extent of the skills he had acquired during his working life.*

*He produced for the RPL panel several reports he had written, a copy of a ministerial brief recently produced, and examples of letters he had composed all of which provided valid evidence of his competencies.*

*The course expert asked Bill to match his skills and knowledge against the learning outcomes listed for the Communication Skills 1 course.*

*He had acquired skills in negotiating situations; setting up and conducting*



*meetings consisting sometimes of Aboriginal community members and government bureaucrats; researching information and preparing analyses and arguments; writing reports which may include the gathering of statistical information and graphic representation of materials; and writing briefs for his parliamentary minister.*

*The support person on the RPL panel had worked with Bill on projects in Aboriginal affairs in the past. At one time she had been his supervisor. She contributed to the panel's assessment by bringing to light aspects of the tasks on which they had both worked and in which Bill's skills had played a particularly important part.*

*At the conclusion of the interview, the course expert ascertained that the student could match the course outcomes of Communication Skills 1 'more than three fold'. In fact, a highlight of the process adopted in the interview by the course expert was one that enabled recognition of Bill's skills quite rapidly based on his application and verbal evidence.*

*The evidence provided by this case study suggests yet another advantage of RPL assessment. As Bill explained to the panel, he is working in an environment which requires him as a Koori to find a way to uncover opportunities unknown before for his people in a particular field of mainstream employment. His work requires his specific skills and knowledge obtained often by his own initiative but also, he explained, through his particular experiences as a Koori working in government and in the Aboriginal community.*

*It is through this specific background that he has gained the skills which match the learning outcomes of the course which enables him to instigate and coordinate government action in the direction where results may be positive for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.*

This case study emphasises that:

- Bill's skills obtained through Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community work were of a high order in relation to the mainstream course benchmarks.
- Culturally relevant support can help to:
  - draw out the applicant's unique skills and knowledge
  - translate skills acquired from one cultural environment to another.

Participants in the consultations described the support the RPL facilitator can provide for the applicant in the process of gathering evidence for RPL. It may take time, they said, for the RPL facilitator to contact previous employers, and to assist with collating samples of work, etc.

As indicated in the draft RPL policy developed by the **Institute for Aboriginal Development** in Alice Springs, the support person/advocate

*is part of the RPL process from the beginning to the end. Their role is to offer moral support, and to assist the applicant to identify the relevant skills and evidence.*

As other participants in the consultations said:

*The RPL facilitator will often be involved with the gathering of the applicant's evidence for assessment. This person may not be an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person, but will have to be experienced, culturally sensitive and trusted by the applicant.*

#### 4.4.3 Examples of Culturally Appropriate RPL

##### Example 1

The following RPL process, under way at Pundulmurra College of TAFE, Port Headland, WA, is incorporated into existing culturally supportive college processes:

##### ***Case Study 7: Pundulmurra College—WA***

*RPL has been available as a normal course of events when recruiting students into the college and courses. An RPL policy is in the process of being drawn up.*

*As most students are from outlying communities, their interests in training are often based on community development needs.*

*When a student seeks training, an informal interview (with no panel) takes place to research the students background, what he or she has done and in what areas training is necessary for that person's needs. The training provided is very flexible, and it may be that students enrol in single modules at a time rather than undertaking a full course.*

*RPL has been granted to students undertaking office skills training who had already completed the Aboriginal Language Workers course. RPL was granted for study skills and research methods.*

*RPL is also available for students seeking certificates of attainment for modules in areas such as bus licensing and first aid.*

*Features of the RPL process:*

- *the learning outcomes of the course are used to discuss with the student what he or she needs to study*



- *there are usually 2 or 3 people from the community taking part in this discussion to identify what the student already knows and needs to know.*

This case study shows that:

- RPL is incorporated into existing recognition practices and is therefore culturally appropriate. It includes:
  - participation of community members
  - interactive assessment styles.

## Example 2

The case study **Denise in Victoria** illustrates the importance of the environment in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are studying, and the relevance of course curriculum for Aboriginal and Torres Strait RPL applicants.

### *Case Study 8: Denise—Victoria*

*Denise worked in a country school in Victoria as an Aboriginal Educator assisting teachers with the progress of the Koori students. She had grown up learning about her culture from the Elders and other community people and was able to pass on the culture to the Koorie students in the school.*

*She was often invited to talk to groups of parents and students at other schools within the local area where she became well known for her cultural knowledge. She assisted the Local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group with the development of Aboriginal Studies courses, putting together the cultural components for primary, secondary and kindergarten courses. She was also involved with preparation for cultural programs during NAIDOC (National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Day Observance Committee) Week for many years.*

*She spent a number of years interpreting nature and culture in Aboriginal cultural centres and keeping places. Eventually she wanted to be able to further her knowledge in museums and the area of cultural heritage.*

*Denise enrolled in the Certificate in Environment and Heritage Interpretation at the Institute of Koorie Education at Deakin University in Geelong, Victoria. Relevant curriculum is continuously being developed at this Institute and students are involved all the time with their own Aboriginal communities during the course of their studies.*

*It was very clear to the University staff in the science area that her expertise and knowledge matched with many areas of this course of study. Through informal discussion with the course lecturers and support from the Institute of Koorie Education, she was granted recognition of cultural knowledge and advanced standing for entry into the course. Denise is considering enrolling in the diploma level of the course next year.*

This case study shows that:

- the learning outcomes of courses containing cultural knowledge can be matched with the learning outcomes acquired through the cultural life experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people;
- access to recognition of work and life experiences for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is improved when courses of study are inclusive of culture; and
- an educational institution maintaining a culturally supportive environment will enhance the opportunity for an RPL applicant to be granted recognition.

#### 4.4.4 Summary

In summary, the participants in the consultations identified that during the RPL process **cultural support** is necessary when:

- *explaining the RPL process*
- *identifying the benefits of training and RPL*
- *interpreting the benchmarks, i.e. competency standards or learning outcomes*
- *interpreting and/or translating language used by the assessor and applicant*
- *assisting with identifying competencies and matching them against the benchmark prior to assessment*
- *assisting with the RPL application form, if one is necessary*
- *assisting with gathering evidence for RPL*
- *assisting with the RPL interview/discussion*
- *explaining cultural needs and priorities to the RPL facilitator and the assessor*
- *claiming competence on behalf of the applicant (usually by an Elder)*
- *assisting with the decision about appropriate assessment methods*
- *assisting with the assessment, i.e. drawing out the applicant's prior learning.*

## Conclusion

- The cultural needs of an RPL applicant can be maintained during the RPL process through appropriate cultural support. For example, Elders, community people, members of a group, co-workers etc.
- Cultural support can assist with many aspects of the RPL assessment.
- There are recognition practices already in place for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander applicants which fulfil the requirements of applicants for cultural support.
- It is important for non-Aboriginal support persons and RPL facilitators to be sensitive, culturally aware and accepted by the community and/or individual involved in the RPL assessment.

## Recommendations

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- **That cultural diversity within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and groups be recognised to ensure the development of flexible RPL processes which meet the needs of these communities and groups at the local level.**
- **That training of RPL facilitators and assessors be provided for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples working in the National Vocational Education and Training System.**
- **That RPL facilitator and assessor training programs in the next stages of this project include:**
  - culturally appropriate and flexible assessment methods
  - cultural support during assessment
  - cultural awareness on the part of the RPL facilitator and assessor
  - appropriate language requirements of the benchmark
  - that literacy and language skills are assessed by a language expert.
- **That a culturally appropriate support person/s be available throughout the RPL process for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander applicant.**
- **That the support person/s be chosen by the RPL applicant.**
- **That in order to ensure the RPL process is appropriate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, the nomination of non-Aboriginal RPL facilitators and assessors be accepted by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person or community.**

- **That the training for RPL facilitators be customised to suit the needs of support persons required to assist Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander RPL applicants.**
- **That non-Aboriginal RPL facilitators and assessors undertake cultural awareness training which is relevant to the culture of the RPL applicant.**

## 5 Preparation for RPL

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants in the consultations expressed many issues concerning the implementation of RPL. These issues relate to the purpose of RPL for communities/groups, the availability of information about the RPL process and the practicalities of RPL implementation.

### 5.1 Community Requirements Prior to Implementing RPL

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This section focuses on issues and concerns which may affect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples prior to the establishment of RPL in their communities or groups.

**5.1.1** Participants in the consultations in Far North Queensland said there was uncertainty and doubt about RPL as well as about the benefits of training. This is what they said about RPL:

**What are the benefits?**

*For communities to be confident, there have to be believable and tangible outcomes of training and assessment such as more pay, better scope for community development, a genuine increase in skills, access to credentials and better access to jobs which are wanted and needed. There is also a need for the RPL process to have equal status with other assessment processes.*

**What happens?**

*There may be uncertainty amongst communities about a process believed to be still unknown and untried. There is concern that RPL may lead people to experience negative and uncomfortable contact with non-Aboriginal people (RPL facilitators and assessors). Will RPL be a 'shame' experience in which community people may feel they have failed if they do not take part in the RPL process?*

*There is fear that the process will be 'gammin' (not genuine) and will not be recognised by training institutions and employers. Is RPL a real 'white man's way'? That is, will the outcomes be acceptable in the wider community?*

**What effects will RPL have?**

*There is concern that RPL may cause tension between communities, groups and clans. It must be a genuine and valid process with tangible outcomes providing respect for people from communities as well as mainstream employers and institutions.*

## Is RPL relevant?

*An important question about RPL for communities is whether it is relevant. If the aims and aspirations of community people are directed towards community development rather than the goals of individual people, then the purpose and style of training and assessment must be based on the community's priorities. Will RPL benefit the community as a whole? If so, how?*

5.1.2 Participants in the consultations said the information made available to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples about RPL must be thorough. Many groups recommended that it be delivered in stages, taking whatever time is necessary.

The following example of an RPL pilot study shows the RPL procedure adopted by the Aboriginal TAFE staff at Far North Queensland Institute of TAFE who have been working on a DEET RPL pilot project in trade training within remote communities.

### ***Case Study 9: RPL Pilot Study—Far North Queensland***

#### ***Stage 1***

*A letter was delivered from the TAFE college to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander council clerks in remote communities. The letter introduced RPL and invited the council clerks to nominate likely RPL candidates from amongst their community employees. Time was allowed for the council clerks to discuss this letter and the RPL project at their council meetings.*

#### ***Stage 2***

*The TAFE staff then visited the council clerks again and spent some more time discussing RPL, answering questions and ensuring the clerks were clear about the benefits of RPL to their employees. They discussed the list of potential RPL candidates the council clerks had developed by this stage.*

#### ***Stage 3***

*The TAFE staff then visited each community and talked to individuals who showed interest in RPL, assisting them to decide whether to put their names down on the list of likely RPL applicants. Contact and discussion was also made with those who had already put their names on the list at the suggestion of the council clerks.*

#### ***Stage 4***

*The staff then assisted the applicants to identify their skills and knowledge,*

*gather examples of work they have done, and tick competencies they have already acquired from a competency profile provided.*

*The three visits to each community took place over a period of approximately three months. It is important to make this time available to ensure people have the opportunity to understand RPL and the benefits to them of the process. Ideally, these visits have to be as close together as possible, allowing for funerals, festivals and hunting seasons.*

*The applicants were encouraged to bring to the RPL discussion phase, people who would make them feel comfortable. They brought wives, friends, workmates and people who knew their abilities and their work and life experiences.*

*Competencies were identified during the interview and a final matching against the competency profile took place.*

This pilot study illustrates that communities are likely to require adequate time to:

- determine community priorities in relation to RPL
- gain information about RPL in stages
- be provided with appropriate assistance to establish a culturally appropriate RPL process.

For further information about this pilot study, refer to page 125 in the Appendix.

## **5.2 Community Requirements for Adequate and Appropriate RPL Information**

Of major importance to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is the availability of information which is both clear and readily accessible. The actual nature of this information will differ from community to community and will depend on a number of factors, including:

- culture
- language
- degree of familiarity with education and training
- past experiences with education training and employment
- individual and group goals and priorities

### 5.2.1 Format

Participants in the consultations from the **ACT** made the following recommendations about providing adequate information:

#### RPL Awareness Campaign

*An RPL awareness campaign should be developed to inform all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples about this RPL project and about the benefits of RPL. The program would include information packages, videos, coloured posters, pictures and be free from jargon.*

#### RPL Register

*Through the awareness campaign, a register of people willing to become RPL trained and another register of likely Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander RPL candidates could be collated.*

#### Publicity

*Some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people live and work in remote areas, have little access to training institutions and workplaces, and are part of very small Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations. These groups must have information about the way RPL can benefit them. For example, through Aboriginal newspapers, videos, posters, handbooks, course programs.*

#### Data

*Data could be collated relating to the numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people entering training in industry and TAFE, together with a record of their skills and knowledge recognised through RPL.*

*It would be an encouragement to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people if the data indicated whether the RPL applicant's competencies exceeded the benchmark during RPL assessment. The data would be used as a tool by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in negotiations with government and funding bodies to achieve goals related to access and participation in education, training and employment. The data would also be used to publicise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander skills and knowledge and would assist with gaining acknowledgment by the wider community.*

Participants in the Victorian consultations recommended that:

*In order to improve Koori access to RPL, TAFE colleges should be asked to provide information about their RPL policies and practice regarding:*

- *the cost of RPL assessments*
- *the availability of RPL—in which courses and subjects/modules*



- *how RPL is delivered, i.e. to what extent do the RPL procedures and practices match up with the principles (NFROT) which should underpin the process*
- *the number of Kooris who have already accessed the RPL process*
- *the outcomes of RPL assessments of Kooris i.e. have their skills and knowledge exceeded the benchmark? If so, their skills and knowledge should be publicised to gain acknowledgment by the wider community.*
- *the kind of information available for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples entering courses. Is this information and support culturally relevant?*

### 5.2.2 Style

Participants in the consultations said:

*Information must be available in a format and style which suits the community for whom the information is intended. Materials designed by local community people will be more successful in getting the message across.*

#### Visual

*Many groups have expressed the need for information to be visual, e.g. videos, posters, paintings, comic-style publications and designs. These will need to provide straightforward step-by-step explanations of how to proceed with the RPL process in format and language which is accessible and enjoyable to the particular group.*

#### Packages

*Information packages could be developed in stages, to give communities time to experiment with ideas and work on those which are best.*

### 5.2.3 Content

Participants in the Western Australian consultations said:

#### Real Life Examples of RPL

*An effective way of informing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples about RPL is through real life examples of people who have been involved in the RPL process.*

*These examples may be in story form, or as case studies, with detailed accounts of why that person sought RPL, what the process was like for them, the result, and where they are going next with the outcome. These examples must be in style and language appropriate to the particular community for whom they are written.*

*Having information is an access and equity issue. Once people are talking about RPL, there will be a better understanding.*

Many participants said:

### Training Reform

*Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities want accessible information about competency based training and training reforms to better understand the context of RPL. This information would not only provide important information for the immediate benefit of communities but would assist with planning for the future.*

*Once the benefits of skilling and gaining qualifications are being discussed, community development can be planned, involving training and assessment and include RPL. Communities must control these developments to ensure that the outcomes are within the scope of the community's needs.*

*There needs to be more information on the right to having access to training through RPL.*

## 5.3 Linking RPL with Existing Recognition Practices

This section provides examples of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples/groups who would benefit from RPL. It shows how aspects of the RPL process can and are already part of existing recognition practices designed to respond to cultural requirements.

### 5.3.1 Example: Victoria

The following case study from Victoria highlights the potential benefit of RPL for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who have been in the prison system:

#### **Case Study 10: John—Victoria**

*The Koori prisoner John, aged 38, was tutored in literacy and numeracy while in custody. He had access to a variety of education programs conducted in the prison by the local TAFE college. John's self-esteem was very low having experienced unemployment for long periods of time, and having grown up in poverty while living on the Murray river banks and having few available opportunities to acquire a good standard of education. Some of his experiences included doing building work on new houses for Koori families. He had found this work through the local Koori community co-operative.*

*While in prison John worked hard developing his writing skills by recording his own life history, by writing letters to friends and practising more formal*

*writing assignments. His progress was supported and monitored by the Koori support person from the TAFE college. Gradually his concept of himself as a learner greatly improved. He developed both short-term and long-term plans and gained confidence about expressing himself and having a desire to learn. Now he is seeking a sign-writing apprenticeship with study in TAFE, to commence as soon as he is released from prison.*

*Kooris in the prison system can be assisted to identify their work and life experiences. At a later stage if they wish to seek RPL, the identification of their skills and knowledge will prepare them for the RPL process. The time required for this preparation will vary according to the applicant's needs. Cultural support is crucial at this stage and will need to be continued to help boost the confidence of prisoners seeking access to TAFE courses.*

This case study shows the importance of:

- acknowledging existing recognition practices as a lead up to RPL
- allowing adequate time and support to prepare individual people for training and RPL
- culturally appropriate support in preparation for training and RPL.

### 5.3.2 Example: Alice Springs

The following case study is about the development of the RPL process at the **Centre for Appropriate Technology (CAT)** in Alice Springs. It shows how community development needs and priorities shape the design of courses to meet cultural requirements. It also shows the context in which culturally appropriate recognition practices with which RPL can be linked are already under way.

#### ***Case Study 11: Centre for Appropriate Technology (CAT)—Alice Springs, NT***

*The Aboriginal Technical Worker Program (ATWORK) has been specifically designed around projects driven by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and organisations. The program aims to develop practical skills, self confidence, problem solving abilities, awareness of technology options and design, and technical skills that support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community lifestyles.*

*The curriculum document of the 'Certificate in Applied Design and*

*Technology' delivered at CAT states that 'the true credentials of students will, in practice, be recognised and judged by their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander reference community or organisation'. The importance of RPL is therefore likely to be in relation to gaining credentials in the mainstream which will benefit the communities of the CAT students in the long term.*

*An RPL policy has been developed at CAT for students to gain advanced standing into the course and also to have their skills and knowledge matched against modules of other accredited courses. RPL procedures are currently being developed including informal interviews and tests.*

*A process to recognise and acknowledge the student's skills and competencies is already in place as part of the delivery of the course. The students are required to develop a portfolio of their activities in community project development work. The portfolio includes the student's local knowledge along with the problem solving and other skills acquired in the training.*

*Ongoing assistance is provided to the students in collating information for the portfolio, encouraging identification of the student's competencies. This portfolio could be used as evidence for claiming for RPL when the time is right for the student.*

This case study shows that:

- RPL can be linked with existing culturally appropriate training delivery, e.g. development of portfolio of evidence.
- Development of an appropriate RPL process must be related to community development priorities in relation to training.

## 5.4 Funding Requirements to Support RPL

Adequate funding to support an information strategy during the implementation of RPL is important to ensure community involvement in the process at the local level.

### 5.4.1 Funding for Adequate Preparation Time

The following steps towards developing the RPL process in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities were suggested by the focus group in Port Augusta, South Australia. They illustrate the amount of time and preparation required to adequately support an effective implementation of the process. Funding will be required to fulfil these requirements. These steps are:

- *Funding made available for RPL community meetings which should include representatives from TAFE, DEET and ATSIC.*
- *Communities to identify their specific needs for RPL (e.g. training needs, gaining wage equality, etc.).*
- *Persons be identified to take on role of community RPL representative (e.g. community development officers from Aboriginal organisations).*
- *Above persons be trained as an RPL facilitator and RPL trainer.*
- *Trained persons start up RPL in their community including training other community people as RPL facilitators.*
- *Above persons be responsible for submission writing for community RPL budgets (e.g. to fund staff development, and availability of RPL facilitators etc.).*
- *Above persons keep up-to-date information about RPL to create awareness of RPL in the community (e.g. by word of mouth, or appropriate local community communication style).*
- *RPL information materials including pamphlets, videos, posters, case studies etc. be used to make the process clear and accessible at the local level.*
- *RPL training made available to ATSIC staff to assist with RPL, and to support the RPL training requirements of communities.*
- *Ongoing meetings share and build on RPL experiences.*
- *RPL information be made available to CES, DEET (and ABSTUDY) who will be the first points of access to RPL for many people.*

5.4.2 Participants in the consultations in the ACT made the following suggestions for providing information about RPL for communities. Funding will be required to fulfil these requirements, which are:

*A steering committee be developed to represent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who are going to be involved in RPL.*

*This committee would do the networking, provide a forum for the exchange of ideas and concerns, and be responsible for creating awareness of RPL amongst all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities nationally.*

## Recommendations

- **That a national Vocational Education and Training conference for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples be held to provide information and discussion of the issues on the training reforms as a context within which to understand RPL.**

- That information workshops/awareness campaigns on the training reforms be made available to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.
- That prior to the implementation of culturally appropriate RPL at the local community level, a nationally coordinated RPL awareness campaign for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples be conducted.
- That Local Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups (LAECGs) use their structures to distribute information about RPL to communities within states and territories.
- That culturally appropriate information about RPL be developed by education providers and industry to promote an understanding of the RPL process by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and trainees.
- That RPL be promoted as an opportunity to recognise skills and knowledge for career path development to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, their communities, and to industry.
- That the RPL process used for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander applicants be flexible to reflect the time and effort required to support the application.
- That industries which offer employment to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples/communities provide updated information regarding their organisation's developments in RPL processes and the training reforms.
- That industry training policy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in remote communities be developed, such as that undertaken in the past by the National Aboriginal Education Committee (NAEC).
- That the National Staff Development Committee distribute widely the RPL project report for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

# 6 Curriculum, Competency Standards and RPL

This section highlights fundamental concerns about equity and access in relation to training, assessment and RPL of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The following issues relate to curriculum development and the delivery of training and assessment. They identify a number of challenges to the development of culturally appropriate RPL processes raised by participants in the consultations, and highlighted by the literature search.

## 6.1 Issues Affecting Access to RPL for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples

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### 6.1.1 To increase access to RPL, the benchmark has to be clearly defined.

RPL assessment requires that an individual's learning outcomes or competencies acquired from work experiences, life experiences and formal training, are matched against predetermined **benchmarks** in order to determine whether RPL should be granted.

When a person is being assessed, the benchmarks (learning outcomes or competency standards) must be available prior to assessment, so that the applicant can identify whether they have achieved competency at the required standard or level of competence expected.

It follows, then, that the benchmarks must be clearly defined so that the assessor and the RPL applicant know exactly what is expected.

### 6.1.2 To increase access to RPL, the benchmark should be inclusive of culture.

The nature of the benchmark, how it is expressed, what it implies, what it means, has an impact on the way it is interpreted, learned and therefore how it will be assessed through any process of assessment, including RPL.

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, if the competency standard or learning outcome against which a person will be assessed for RPL relates exclusively to the dominant culture, then this may affect their access to both training and assessment.

Participants in the consultations expressed the following in relation to the issue of the benchmark:

- In Melbourne during the early stages of research connected with this project, at a consultation with Kooris based in a community-controlled organisation, concern was raised about the benchmarks used in RPL assessment. This concern was expressed as follows:



- We have our own benchmarks, so how will your RPL process work for us, if our benchmarks aren't being used when we are being assessed?*
- In **Perth**, an RPL focus group expressed similar concern when it raised the issue of the maintenance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples cultures during RPL assessments. The participants said:
  - What scope would there be for the benchmarks during RPL assessment to include the culture of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander RPL applicant?*
  - Would there be appropriate assistance and support for interpreting benchmarks so that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' understanding and ways of doing and learning would be included in the assessment?*

The following information obtained from the **literature search** relates to the issue of culturally inclusive benchmarks for assessment:

- David Kirkby, in 'Competence—Methodology or Ideology? The implications of Competency Based Training for Aboriginal vocational education and self-determination' (1993), examines CBT and its application for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The paper 'draws attention to the problematic nature of CBT and postulates that, as a normative and conservative trend derived from economic rationalist ideology, CBT is in fact inimical to the ideal of Aboriginal self-determination' (p. 1).  
  
Kirkby warns of the consequences of adopting CBT—a system which fails to 'adequately acknowledge and cater for cultural diversity'. He sees the danger of this system in terms of legitimating 'attempts to reproduce mainstream society within Aboriginal contexts', with the result that 'Aboriginal people are increasingly expected to abandon specifically Aboriginal cultural practices, modes of organisation and domains in favour of "mainstream" culture and services' (p. 4).
- Mawer and Field (1995) in their report, *One Size Fits Some: Competency Based Training and Non-English Speaking Background People*, also note that there are fundamental issues to be resolved in the benchmarks used for assessment. They state: 'Even though competency standards bodies have strong commitment to access and equity principles, the lack of resources, specific models and guidance have been obstacles to the development of equitable holistic standards. The net effect has tended to be the perpetrations of existing patterns of discrimination and of narrow approaches to skill formation' (p. 3).

**There has, however, been some movement towards addressing these issues.**

- Clare Burton (1995), in her issues paper *Equity Principles in Competency*



*Standards: Development and Implementation* (p. 18), discusses the work being done by D. Kickett and W. Murray on Aboriginal Terms of Reference for incorporation into competency standards. (For further discussion about this, refer to section 6.2 of this report.)

The Terms of Reference incorporate 'specific and implicit cultural values, beliefs and priorities from which Aboriginal standards are derived, validated and practised' (Kickett 1992).

Under Equity Principle 6 of her paper 'Validate over time: The use of personal activities, attitudes, and values as competencies', Burton notes 'Aboriginal cultural values are slowly gaining recognition in our legal and political systems, and the process of recognition will continue'.

- In her description of the 'hard-to-assess competencies', Burton says that if they are omitted the assessment is invalid, yet to include them seems to pose difficulties for the assessor.

*As many participants in this project have said, 'hard-to-assess' competencies must be included in assessment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Non-Aboriginal people must make the effort to minimise the potential for bias and discrimination in assessment.*

### 6.1.3 To increase access to RPL, approaches to the delivery of training and assessment should be flexible.

During the consultations, participants emphasised that delivery modes used in training can affect access to the benchmarks for assessment.

Participants illustrated some examples of approaches to training which accommodate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' learning styles and assessment preferences. These examples show how the training delivery has an effect on access to RPL.

- *At the Murrumbidgee Agricultural College, a number of short accredited courses in farming and horticulture have been developed through close consultation with local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. The delivery of these courses is very flexible to enable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members to fulfil their community responsibilities while undertaking a course of study. The sixteen-week course can be completed over six months and the eight-week course can be completed over twenty-five weeks.*
- *In the Northern Territory, the NT University provides flexible delivery of trade training to remote communities. The curriculum writers, teachers and trainers are required to have specialist knowledge and experience in remote community training to ensure course delivery is flexible and therefore appropriate.*  
*To improve access to trade training, potential trainees who do not have the required literacy and numeracy skill levels to achieve the competency*

*standards, undertake the development of these skills in parallel with the technical training modules. They are assessed against the standards/benchmarks for the trade component of their training.*

- *Another way of attending to the cultural appropriateness of training is to identify the need for and develop cultural competencies in addition to the core modules of courses. The work is additional to the mainstream program and while considered to be valuable, it imposes an extra work load.*

*In many TAFE colleges modules such as these are added in a variety of ways in courses designed for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. These courses are supported by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community. The outcomes are improved employment opportunities and improved confidence in study and work skills.*

- *In Far North Queensland, the Cape Slattery Silica Mine Company has developed and is now delivering recognised training to its employees, 55% of whom are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from surrounding communities.*

*Employees progress within the career path structure which has been developed from entry level to supervisory and management positions.*

*The training materials have been developed to suit the needs of the trainees through consultation with the local communities and employees and with unions and management. Cultural support is provided during the training to ensure clear and accessible interpretation of the standards.*

*Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employees have been trained as trainers and are increasingly responsible for the training delivery. The emphasis is on culturally appropriate training delivery for this company which has improved access to the benchmark and to obtaining nationally recognised credentials for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander remote communities.*

The following is an excerpt from the Cape Slattery case study and shows how the RPL process is implemented.

### ***Case Study 12: Cape Slattery Silica Mine, Cape York Peninsula— RPL Process***

*One hundred employees have been assessed for RPL for the first stage of the Mining Certificate. The RPL process is as follows:*

1. *External assessors trained in RPL were brought in from the Queensland School of Mines (Rockhampton). The assessors were introduced to the activities of the company and to the fact that it is situated in the midst of Aboriginal communities. The employees have had no formal training, but*

*often have had years of experience working on the mine as well as a variety of relevant previous life and work experience.*

*2 The assessors spent five days discussing the RPL process with the applicants and trade unionists and making necessary arrangements for the RPL assessments.*

*3 Another five days were spent doing the RPL assessments. Each person was assessed against the benchmarks on a one-to-one basis and was granted RPL for level one of the Certificate of Mining.*

*4 As the module delivery was developed by the Aboriginal trainers, the background, experiences and knowledge of the trainees was taken into consideration in the development of the learning outcomes.*

*The applicants did not require a support person for their RPL assessment as the competencies they had acquired from work and life experiences had already been taken into consideration during the training by the Aboriginal trainers. In other words, the cultural support is provided during the training and is not so much needed during assessment. Therefore, additional support for assessment is not generally required.*

*5 RPL for Level 2 of the Certificate of Mining will be offered in July.*

(For more detail about this case study, see the Appendix, p. 127.)

This case study shows that:

- The RPL process is part of culturally appropriate training delivery which has a flow-on effect for the conduct of assessment.
- The benchmarks developed for training are culturally inclusive and are therefore made accessible to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.
- In the above case studies, training delivery incorporating the learning styles of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people can assist with assessment by providing culturally appropriate training which incorporates culturally inclusive interpretation of the benchmark for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

## Conclusion

- For the implementation of RPL the benchmarks for assessment should be developed in consultation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. In this way they will be culturally inclusive and relevant.

- RPL facilitators and assessors should be equipped with the skills and knowledge to interpret existing benchmarks in a manner which promotes access for applicants from culturally diverse backgrounds.
- Flexible delivery of training and assessment will assist with providing access to credentials. It will assist trainees to complete courses.

#### 6.1.4 To Increase Access to RPL

To increase access to RPL, assessors must be able to select and adapt assessment methods to suit Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The selection of an appropriate assessor is critical to RPL to ensure the assessment is valid.

The following RPL case study from the Institute for Aboriginal Development (IAD) in Alice Springs illustrates the cultural requirements of the assessor:

##### *Case Study 13*

*A student applying for RPL in an Aboriginal history module at IAD, took her knowledge and evidence for her claim for RPL to the local traditional people's council. The council assessed her as competent and granted her RPL.*

*The non-Aboriginal teacher of the module had handed over the assessment to the council for the following reasons:*

- *It was not possible for the teacher to be an expert in the module as it related to specific cultural knowledge the teacher could not have.*
- *It was not appropriate for this teacher to assess this student because of a gender difference.*

This case study shows that:

- appropriate knowledge of the assessor in the RPL process is crucial to valid assessment
- gender issues may determine the appropriateness of the assessor.

Due to the cultural nature of the curriculum content of courses at IAD, assessment methods, including RPL, require skill and knowledge in the culture. Assessments can be done by Aboriginal community people such as Elders, who are also involved in the delivery of the course. The participants in the consultations said,

*It is of concern that assessment in areas of cultural knowledge made by Aboriginal people in the community who are recognised as holding the knowledge and skill of the culture may not be accepted as legitimate. If assessment is not conducted according to the national competencies standards required of assessors, then will it be treated as lacking in validity? Will the outcomes of assessments made by Aboriginal people acknowledged as 'experts' in their communities be recorded in the same way other assessments are recorded?*

In Far North Queensland, the participants described their approach to the assessment of cultural knowledge and to the way they establish the authority of the assessor:

*During the assessment of cultural knowledge, an Aboriginal teacher should be present to assist a non-Aboriginal teacher.*

*When the person most appropriate to do the assessment is a community Elder or another community person who is not a 'recognised' assessor or teacher, then an Aboriginal teacher can assist with the assessment if necessary.*

Information was obtained from the literature search related to the requirements of assessors to provide culturally appropriate assessment.

- As Clare Burton states, in *Equity Principles in Competency Standards: Development and Implementation*, under Equity in Assessment Principle 7, 'The reliability of assessment among assessors ... needs to be established so that there is confidence that the sex, race, disability or other irrelevant characteristics of the candidate do not affect the decision' (p. 29).

Burton points out that it is important to prepare assessors to conduct assessments for members of Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) groups. She specifies the additional training required for assessors 'in the assessment of competencies of ... people of different cultural background, and particularly of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' performances' (p. 30).

In this paper she goes on to state that wide consultation is necessary in the development of competency standards. Data should come from 'a representative sample' of people involved in that area or occupation (Equity Principle 1).

- Mawer and Field, in *One Size Fits Some: Competency Based Training and NESB People*, discuss the national assessor standards and point to the need for these to focus more sharply on the skills required to select and adapt assessment methodologies to suit the requirements of particular

groups. These could then meet nationally agreed principles for fair and valid assessment (p. 77).

- Similarly, the set of nine Equity Principles for Competency Standards Development and ten Equity Principles for Assessment that Clare Burton has identified (in *Equity Principles in Competency Standards: Development and Implementation*) provides clear guidance for developing culturally appropriate assessment methods, including advice on the extent of consultation required for the establishment of competencies.

## 6.2 Progress Concerning the Development of Culturally Inclusive Curriculum and Competency Standards

As participants in the Northern Territory consultations have expressed:

*Aboriginal people have been exploited through lack of access to training, credentials, jobs and equal pay ... RPL is a process of struggle against these inequities.*

With the development of culturally inclusive curriculum and competency standards, RPL has the potential to focus on the point at which the two cultures meet (as suggested previously in this report by Ellen Gapan Gaykamaŋu, Nungalinya College, in the Northern Territory), the genuine recognition of the competencies of one culture by another culture, through culturally appropriate processes.

### 6.2.1 Literature Search

Information obtained from the literature search illustrates current progress in culturally inclusive curriculum development.

- The paper by Glenis Grogan and Roz Walker, 'Standards and indigenous cultures: Issues of equity and cultural integrity in higher education and the workplace', states that in relation to debate surrounding the competency movement, the 'fundamental philosophical questions concerned with equity and cultural issues which underpin genuine educational and social reform are often overlooked'.

The paper refers to work in the Centre for Aboriginal Studies (CAS), Curtin University, Perth, involving the development of competency standards which address issues of equity and cultural appropriateness of education and training.

The aim of the Centre's work is to 'ensure that the development of competency standards does not deliberately or unintentionally discriminate against, further marginalise or assimilate indigenous people'.

Two areas within the CAS—Aboriginal Community Management and Development, and Indigenous Community Health—have involved the design of courses to 'increase the access and participation of Aboriginal



people in higher education and enhance their employment prospects in the wider society in a manner consistent with Aboriginal self-determination’.

The CAS courses have developed a ‘role construct of a competent professional practitioner who is both skilled and committed’ to work as an agent of social change for Aboriginal people in their work and community contexts’.

The standards within the curriculum design process (including assessment in the workplace) ‘recognise a much more complex reality than most discussions of competency development suggest’.

Ultimately, this work aims to incorporate Aboriginal standards, values and ways of working into the curriculum content and delivery, and into assessment standards and finally into position statements, award structures and career paths in the many areas of employment in health, service delivery, bureaucracy and community management in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are currently working.

- Further work in the CAS, the Standards Development Project, in negotiation with Community Services, Health and Education Industry Training Council (CSH&EITC), has involved the establishment of Aboriginal Terms of Reference Competency Standards.

CAS has adopted the following general meaning of Aboriginal Terms of Reference:

Aboriginal Terms of Reference (ATR) encompasses the cultural knowledge, understanding and experiences that are associated with a commitment to Aboriginal ways of thinking, working and reflecting. ATR incorporates specific and implicit cultural values, beliefs and priorities from which Aboriginal standards are derived, validated and practised. These standards vary according to the diverse range of cultural values, beliefs and priorities from within local settings and specific contexts.

*(Aboriginal Terms of Reference Competency Standards 1995)*

The report published in November, 1995 by the CSH&EITC refers to the incorporation of Aboriginal Terms of Reference (ATR) in developing competencies for the Community Services, Health and Education industries. The need for this has arisen due to the social justice issues inherent in the standards for these industries and the need to improve the effectiveness of services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Western Australia.

According to the CAS, the incorporation of ATR highlights the need to ‘establish a process to incorporate Aboriginal cultural standards which are both community driven and relevant to industry sectors to ensure greater equity for students in the assessment of competency standards in the workplace’.

The three distinct ATR units of competency identified by the Standards Development Project ‘will require employer groups to demonstrate a respect



for Aboriginal standards and values and a willingness to recognise and implement these in the workplace’.

The following is an example of a competency standard within Aboriginal Terms of Reference from the CSH and EITC Report (excerpt only):

**Competency:** Child protection

**Unit/task:** Interview—assess

**Minimum performance standards to be met:**

‘Information is obtained in ways which conform with local Aboriginal community standards ...’

**What a person must know, remember, or be skilled in:**

‘Ability to use effective listening skills, to interpret the meaning of local expressions and the way English language is used ...’

The effect of these developments in Aboriginal Terms of Reference Competency Standards will have far reaching consequences for developing RPL processes and for RPL facilitator and assessor training programs.

### 6.2.2 Course Development

The examples below are of courses being developed in response to community needs inclusive of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander competencies.

- *In Tasmania a land management course is being developed specifically for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to provide them with skills required for future land claims.*  
*The course will be delivered by the Tasmanian Aboriginal Land Council. RPL will be available, acknowledging and building upon the many land care skills of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.*
- *In Western Australia, a Certificate in Aboriginal Cultural Tourism will be developed and offered by Pundulmurra College, Port Headland.*  
*The course will cater for the range of experiences and areas of knowledge of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander trainees. For example, some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples may require less training in the cultural area and more in the basic skills areas, including tour guide administration. Others may require more in the cultural areas than the basic skills. The cultural requirements are expressed explicitly in the benchmarks, facilitating assessment of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander trainees. The course acknowledges and builds upon cultural skills and knowledge.*
- *Staff at the Institute for Aboriginal Development (IAD) in Alice Springs are writing courses for accreditation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities using an action learning approach. All course curriculum developed by IAD is aimed at being inclusive of Aboriginal*

*culture focusing on the maintenance of culture and drawing on oral history and the knowledge of Aboriginal Elders.*

*Participants in the Northern Territory said that because the National Training Board (now the Standards and Curriculum Council) promotes national standards agreed upon by industry, unions, education and government, it is increasingly difficult for the Northern Territory Education and Training Authority (NTETA) to accept and promote the development of Aboriginal competency standards in training and employment. It is therefore difficult for IAD to focus on writing culturally inclusive curriculum in this national context.*

*They also expressed the view that there should be support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students undertaking non-accredited courses often delivered by non-registered providers. The competencies achieved by students in these courses may be inclusive of culture and should be recognised through RPL and articulation.*

*The RPL process needs to be taken up more widely in these contexts to benefit Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and acknowledge their skills wherever these were gained.*

- *The development of the 8th Mayer Key Competency—Cultural Understandings will improve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' access to training and the acquisition of credentials.*

*This key competency recognises that people must acknowledge cultures as an essential prerequisite in developing employment, education and training opportunities.*

*In connection with the development of this competency, Recommendation 27 of the National Review of Education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples refers to the development of a 'mandatory element' of curricula in courses of study, aimed at improving non-indigenous Australians' understanding of and respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' traditional and contemporary cultures.*

*The recommendation stipulates that this part of the curricula be delivered where possible by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and that 'accreditation and assessment bodies should formally recognise the prior knowledge and understanding that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students hold in relation to these courses'.*

## Conclusion

- RPL ultimately has the potential to promote a shift in the social and economic situation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples by the recognition of competencies inclusive of culture in training and assessment.

- Courses which include cultural competencies will have the potential to enhance the development of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities/groups at the local level.

## 6.3 Potential Impact of RPL on Curriculum Development and Competency Standards

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Many participants in the consultations expressed the view that RPL has the potential to affect the content of the curriculum in ways which can benefit Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

### 6.3.1 RPL—Affirming Culture

Some participants in the consultations in Queensland expressed the following views in relation to RPL:

*RPL should not be used to emphasise mainstream training and the development of mainstream skills as a goal in itself. This undermines Aboriginal self-determination. The RPL process should contribute to emphasising the need for culturally appropriate training for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.*

*RPL should have an impact on the way the training and education system accommodates Aboriginality. RPL should be promoted as a process of cultural affirmation, that is, a process whereby Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are able to express who they are, and for others to learn from that. RPL should not add to the processes of assimilation.*

Participants in all states and territories expressed concern that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander competencies can be undermined if they are not included in the benchmark for assessment. They may not be valued, not recognised and upheld, and therefore not developed through training and education processes.

Queensland participants stated:

*RPL should be used to provide opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to develop and strengthen the skills they were originally employed for (in 'identified positions'). That is, RPL should help highlight Aboriginality and the importance of valuing this in the workplace.*

### 6.3.2 Literature Search

Information found in the literature search throws further light on this issue. Clare Burton explains, in *Equity Principles in Competency Standards: Development and Implementation*, that concepts of competency differ amongst training providers and employers. The concept of competency is based on the way it is interpreted, and this affects whether the outcomes of training and

assessment will be equitable or not. 'How the term is understood affects how competency standards are developed and affects assessment arrangements and methods.'

An integrated approach (as pointed out by Burton) to developing standards would include the competencies of all groups and provide for the development of equitable assessment and recognition methods.

## 6.4 Examples of Curriculum which can Deny Access

The following case studies reveal situations which may deny Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples access to training and RPL. They show that when the curriculum content is devoid of culturally inclusive competencies, the potential for recognition of the full range of competencies of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is markedly reduced.

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander trainee teachers in Tasmania expressed distress that they cannot share their cultural knowledge, or be recognised in their course for this knowledge they have gained as teachers in their communities.*

*They said they felt that the environments in which they have lived and the people with whom they are interacting as trainee teachers is not recognised as contributing value to the course. They are not able to claim recognition of competence in these areas, yet the knowledge and skills they possess are crucial to them as teachers.*
- In the ACT, participants reflected on the development of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language interpreter training provided by the Federal Attorney-General's Department. This training, participants said, does not include the knowledge, skill and experience of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander trainee interpreters. Competencies relating to the knowledge of language, and the connection between the languages of standard English, Aboriginal English, Creole English, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander traditional languages, are not included in the curriculum.*

*In the course so far, there is no scope for recognition and development of these competencies unique to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. This is a major barrier to skills recognition in a course which could reasonably be expected to incorporate and value skills held in this area.*

## 6.5 Challenges for the Future

As Grogan and Walker point out, in 'Standards and indigenous cultures: Issues of equity and cultural integrity in higher education and the workplace', there are many challenges for the future concerning genuine progress towards equity in education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

In their paper, a major challenge is 'the difficulty of convincing employers of the value and legitimacy of using an integrated competency approach to learning within the workplace'. They say, 'A number of students have reported that their employers are reluctant to recognise their skills and course qualifications ... despite the fact that these courses have satisfied rigorous university course approval procedures'.

A similar situation has occurred in Canada, where the aboriginal graduates of the teacher training course at the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College, University of Regina, have difficulty in gaining employment on the grounds that their indigenous qualifications are not 'up to standard' despite the fact that the course has passed the accreditation process.

However, according to Marjorie Lovallee, Lecturer, Department of Indian Education at the above college, there is increasing gradual acceptance in Canada of indigenous courses, as there are increases in the number of indigenous learning institutions, encouragement towards including more aboriginal content into courses and programs, increases in the aboriginal population in schools, and recognition and acceptance of the value of culturally diverse learning environments.

## **Recommendations**

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- That the Standards and Curriculum Council ensure that the NFROT principles adequately include consideration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' cultures so that the entry requirements of courses being presented for accreditation and reaccreditation are accessible to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.
- That the development of the cultural awareness training for non-Aboriginal RPL facilitators and assessors give careful consideration to the ability to interpret competencies and learning outcomes in culturally appropriate ways.
- That in areas where knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures are being assessed, Elders and others recognised by the particular Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community be involved with the assessment decision in the RPL process.
- That explicit reference be made to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures in the development of the 8th Key Competency (Cultural Understandings) and that this matter be referred to the Curriculum Corporation and the Standards and Curriculum Council of ANTA.

- **That the Australian Vice-Chancellor's Committee on Credit Transfer consult with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples regarding the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples seeking RPL within the higher education sector.**

# 7 Factors Inhibiting the Introduction and Implementation of RPL

## 7.1 System Barriers

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The project identified a number of factors which inhibit access to training for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples at the state and federal levels. These factors will impact on the introduction and implementation of RPL.

The following factors, adversely affecting RPL development for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, were expressed by the participants in the project's consultations.

### 7.1.1 Lack of Cultural Awareness

A lack of cultural awareness and sensitivity on the part of non-Aboriginal people in the NVET system and a lack of culturally appropriate and accessible information about RPL in TAFE institutes, colleges and industry, may lead to a denial of equity and access to the RPL process for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The following points were made by a focus group in Alice Springs about the TAFE system:

*Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students can be disadvantaged by not being able to easily access the course language and to know which course they should do initially. Any trainer involved in course delivery needs to be trained in how to describe the course to the student leading into discussion of possible RPL.*

*Barriers should be taken away, as access to and equitable participation in RPL is the student's right.*

*The difference between being granted an exemption and being granted RPL should be made clear to students so that they are aware of and can prepare for the requirements of applying for RPL.*

### 7.1.2 Lack of Culturally Appropriate Support for Students

TAFE funding to provide culturally appropriate support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students is crucial for ensuring access to training and RPL. However, appropriate funding is not always available, as indicated by the following. In Tasmania, the participants in the focus group said:

*There is no funding for support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in Tasmanian TAFE institutes. There are no Aboriginal liaison officers and no-one to therefore support the cultural needs of students involved in courses and to make appropriate links for them between their communities and the TAFE college.*



*Aboriginal Access Workers in TAFE institutes in Tasmania are funded on limited budgets by the federally funded Aboriginal Education Strategic Initiatives Program (ASEIP). Their role is to canvass appropriate courses and training for their local community. They are often required to cover wide geographical areas within the state. Some are also involved with teaching. These people do not have the time and resources to support potential Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander RPL applicants.*

*This means there is no appropriate support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in TAFE in Tasmania.*

### 7.1.3 Over-Assessment

Experiences of RPL for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have often been negative in that applicants have been subjected to rigid and culturally inappropriate assessment methods, finding these stressful and difficult.

Where there is a poor understanding of the RPL process, or lack of adequate RPL training on the part of the RPL assessors, incorrect and stringent assessment methods can be imposed. The inexperienced RPL assessor may assess at a higher level than if the candidate had undertaken the entire course.

The following case study illustrates an experience of a student applying for RPL which has prevented him from benefiting from the process. The RPL assessors' methods of assessment had the effect of disadvantaging the student.

#### **Case Study 14: Joe**

*Joe worked for many years while studying in an accredited course in his own community. He wanted to gain a formal qualification to improve his knowledge and skills, but also to be recognised for his knowledge by being granted RPL. This qualification would then enable him to be employed at a better salary or apply for a higher position.*

*After an initial interview to discuss RPL with two assessors who were very sensitive and supportive, a third assessor had a meeting with a course committee to discuss Joe's work. At no point was Joe asked to attend an RPL interview, or to present written documents to support his RPL application (of which he had plenty), or to bring to an interview the people whom he knew could vouch for his knowledge and skills. However, he received exemptions for some of the modules and for the rest, he had to participate in the written exams.*

*Due to his extensive work experience and knowledge he later applied for RPL for the theory-based modules. He was told that he would be granted RPL, however, in this case the person was told that the course committee*

*had been consulted and that the easiest way would be for him to complete written exams.*

*In addition to undertaking the formal exams he had to complete course work for a number of weeks gaining other skills. This was no problem to him. However, RPL was not offered for the theory based subjects at all. In Joe's opinion all it amounted to was 'fast tracking'.*

*Joe said the process chosen for RPL made it easy on the assessors, not the applicant. He decided that to gain this qualification, it was a case of 'Just get on with it otherwise god knows how much more dithering around it would take to gain this qualification'.*

*Also in Joe's opinion, RPL assessors need to know exactly what they are doing and to show a lot more support, consideration and cultural sensitivity towards the applicants otherwise a lot of people (especially Aboriginal people) are going to be disadvantaged.*

This case study shows the importance of adequate and culturally appropriate RPL training to ensure that

- RPL assessment meets the assessment criteria of validity and reliability as with other forms of assessment
- flexibility in the choice of RPL assessment methods is available
- the applicant is not over-assessed and therefore denied the benefits of RPL.

#### 7.1.4 Inflexible Procedures of Education/Industry Sectors

Systems may be inflexible in their procedures which can create barriers to access for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Participants in the consultations made the following points:

##### Partial recognition not available

*In colleges and institutes where partial recognition (recognition granted for part of a module) is not available, many RPL Aboriginal and Torres Strait applicants are deterred from entering training programs in which they feel that they, or their skills and knowledge, are not going to be recognised and accepted. They are also likely to be reluctant to apply for RPL for the same reason.*

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## Restrictions imposed on industry's acceptance of RPL

*In the Northern Territory, the Automotive ITAB has implemented an RPL process that is industry-specific. In two cases following the completion of RPL assessments, the NT recognition authority expressed concerns about the RPL process used and asked the Automotive ITAB to explain and qualify its granting of RPL.*

*The two RPL cases cited were awaiting the issuing of credentials from the training unit within the recognition authority.*

## Unfair disadvantages imposed on individuals

*In some situations, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people lack access to formal educational and training due to their lack of basic skills. These people may have work/life experiences which provide them with extensive skills and knowledge in certain areas. If they were to be accepted into courses and RPL were to be available to them, there would be opportunity to gain recognition for their vocational skills. Their time would then be freed up for extra work on basic skills.*

The following case study illustrates the potential success with access to training and RPL for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people when training and assessment delivery addresses the student's specific needs.

### **Case Study: 15**

*An Aboriginal man in Alice Springs who worked in an automotive repair business/petrol station for 8 years had completed approximately 150 short courses in mechanics. His expertise in car mechanics was extremely high, but he had no qualifications to prove this. He had no way of linking up the skills and knowledge he had acquired through his work and life experiences and the unaccredited courses he had undertaken.*

*Apparently his level of literacy precluded him for many years from enrolling in a mechanics course. However recently he was able to enrol in a course, be granted RPL for many of the practical components of the course and be tutored in the literacy skills to enable him to have competent access to the manual and technical terminology required of the competency standards. Within six months, he was awarded a credential.*

This case study shows that

- RPL will enhance access to credentials
- A flexible approach to course delivery will provide access to training for skilled Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people for whom access has been previously denied.

## Restrictive entrance tests, conditions of entry into courses and recruitment procedures

*Barriers are created for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples attempting to access courses and employment due to: the language used, cultural insensitivity on the part of staff and ignorance of the cultural needs of these applicants.*

*Often entrance/recruitment tests and procedures are threatening. They may rely on previous qualifications (such as a Year 12 certificate) or be pitched at an inaccessible level of literacy and/or numeracy for potential Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student/applicants.*

*The tests and procedures can therefore bar Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples from entrance into courses and from gaining employment for which they should be eligible under policies prescribing conditions of equitable access.*

Participants in the Perth focus group said the following about entrance tests and unrealistic barriers to education and training for potential Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students who are skilled and knowledgeable:

*Many Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders do not gain access to teacher training due to these barriers—yet they are 'teachers' in their communities.*

Valuable skills and knowledge of many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people can be overlooked due to these inappropriate methods.

### 7.1.5 Inadequate Course Provision

Participants highlighted issues relating to barriers for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples which specifically relate to people living in **remote communities**. These issues were expressed as follows:

- *Short courses to give people time to prepare for further education and training and RPL are needed in remote communities (e.g. courses which assist with identifying skills or acquiring skills which can later articulate into accredited courses).*
- *In remote communities there are very few courses available to follow on from the training that is provided. If RPL was to be made available, it would still be difficult to access further training, thus decreasing the benefits of RPL.*
- *In remote communities, the number of potential students for any one course may not be great enough to conduct that course at a particular time. The course will therefore not be considered financially viable to run. Thus training options are limited.*



- *The cost for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander resource centres to register as private providers may be too great in relation to their ability to conduct courses, given that it will not always be possible to run courses for small groups of students.*
- *There is not much information about how to access distance education for Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders in remote communities.*
- *A national registry of training resources and programs and modules available to remote communities should be created to inform Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. There should be a range of courses and/or modules available to remote communities.*
- *Funding for training programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community needs are based on interstate co-operative funding schemes provided by ANTA. Funding is inadequate for individual colleges to develop new and culturally appropriate courses.*
- *Skills in developing appropriate curriculum for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's industries are needed, especially by people working in the NVET System.*

### 7.1.6 Narrowness of Curriculum

Participants in the consultations in the Northern Territory said that the following issues relating to barriers in curriculum affect RPL:

- *The national training reforms promote national standards agreed upon by industry, unions, education and government. Training authorities therefore encourage training providers to use existing national modules in training which are not often appropriate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.*
- *Funding agreements for providers are based on the provision of courses containing national competency standards. It is therefore increasingly difficult for training authorities to accept and promote the development of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' standards in training and employment.*  
*The way the national modules are written is not always suitable for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. For example, under the conditions of assessment, a course may assume the student will have access to a range of equipment which is not available on remote communities.*
- *It is therefore difficult for community-controlled providers to focus on writing culturally inclusive curriculum.*
- *Aboriginal trainee teachers in the Territory are increasingly being replaced by qualified teachers who are trained to deliver nationally accredited courses. This detracts from Aboriginal community control of education provision. It therefore undermines the cultural nature of the training.*

## 7.2 Lack of Understanding of RPL

Barriers to access to RPL for potential Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander applicants can be created by people at the management level in TAFE, DEET, state training authorities, ANTA, industry and community training providers when people at management level do not have a clear understanding of the RPL process, its benefits and requirements of procedures to ensure access and equity.

### 7.2.1 DEET

Many people in the NVET System are ignorant of RPL and are not aware of the resourcing issues relating to RPL. The participants in the Broome focus group said:

- *DEET staff are unclear about RPL and therefore do not provide guidelines or information to potential Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander applicants.*
- *DEET offices in centres are not up-to-date with accredited courses so that when Aboriginal people (especially in remote communities) apply for ABSTUDY, DEET takes a long time to process the applications. There seems to be a lack of resources to make this process efficient.*
- *DEET offices don't publicise courses available and neglect to find out community needs in regard to training. They don't consult communities and may even try to duplicate training provision, i.e. run courses which local community organisations are already running. There is very little accountability to Aboriginal communities.*
- *The Federation of Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups should take a more active role in the training reforms, develop guidelines for DEET, make DEET accountable, and promote the development of industry training policy for Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders in remote communities. This work was done in earlier years by the National Aboriginal Education Committee (NAEC).*

### 7.2.2 Industry/Education

In some states some industries dismiss RPL, regarding it as a potentially invalid and unreliable assessment method. This has an adverse effect on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The participants noted that:

- *In the trade areas, the Northern Territory University (NTU) is reluctant to grant RPL for off-the-job components of modules because there is a perceived reluctance in the VET system to issue credentials/licences for people who have been granted RPL.*
- *Some industries/enterprises still require performance descriptions of employees/trainees in addition to competency-based assessment. This can and does result in racial discrimination in addition to undermining the benefits of CBA.*

- *In cases where there is no culturally appropriate modification to enhance access, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from communities can be set up to fail off-the-shelf courses due to their inflexible assessment criteria and RPL processes.*

### 7.3 Lack of Resourcing for RPL

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The cost of RPL can be an inhibiting factor affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Participants said:

- *Resourcing issues affecting RPL include registration of providers, provision of adequate facilities, processing of ABSTUDY entitlements, providing training and assessment.*
- *The lack of resourcing leads to disenchantment with the training system and with employment, in addition to feelings of disempowerment and discrimination experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in these circumstances.*

#### 7.3.1 Remote Communities

Major centres and cities are more efficiently and effectively resourced for training and assessment than are remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. The cost of providing an assessor for RPL assessment in remote communities may preclude access to the process. Participants in Broome said:

- *Funding for training programs for Aboriginal community needs are based on interstate co-operative funding schemes provided by ANTA. Funding is inadequate for individual colleges, such as Pundulmurra in Western Australia, to develop new, appropriate courses.*

#### 7.3.2 TAFE

As participants in the Northern Territory consultations said:

- *The cost of RPL charged by colleges is a barrier to RPL for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander applicants. The cost of RPL can mean it is cheaper for the student to do the whole course.*
- *The cost of staff time for RPL is also a barrier to being able to provide RPL when it is necessary.*

### Recommendations

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- **That the National Vocational Education and Training System ensure the costs for RPL do not disadvantage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.**
- **That DEET examine the potential for funding a scheme similar to the Aboriginal Tutorial Assistance Scheme (ATAS) to provide Aboriginal**



and Torres Strait Islander peoples with support in the carrying out of RPL assessments. This funding should not be means tested. Trained Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander RPL facilitators and assessors could be registered with DEET or the appropriate state/territory authority. That training in RPL be provided to these support people.

- That DEET establish guidelines for delivery of accredited courses and RPL to ensure equity and accessibility for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients in communities including those in remote areas. That these guidelines should be standard practices in all DEET offices.

## 8 Policy Review

This summary analyses existing state/territory RPL policies and procedures in the context of the goals of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy (NATSIEP).

The long-term goals of the NATSIEP can be summarised as:

- involvement by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the process of educational decision making at the local level
- equality of access for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to educational services
- equity of educational access and participation for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples
- equity of appropriate educational outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Recognition of Prior Learning could be seen as one of the strategies by which to achieve these goals as long as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are able to gain access to and be appropriately supported through RPL.

An RPL policy which is sensitive to the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander applicants according to the goals of the NATSIEP will:

- promote access to RPL by providing an RPL service to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples which is relevant and beneficial
- involve members of local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in all stages of the RPL process
- promote equity of educational outcomes by providing culturally appropriate RPL assessments which are valid and reliable
- assist Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to gain access to education and training by ensuring that existing skills and knowledge are recognised and that relevant training is available at appropriate entry levels.

In looking at state/territory RPL policies, potential support available for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander RPL applicants was examined as well as factors which might deter Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples from applying for RPL and carrying through with RPL assessment.

Aspects of policy which have the potential to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander RPL applicants are present in all state/territory policies to differing degrees. Much depends on how policies are interpreted and implemented at the local level.

The following are features of each state/territory RPL policy and procedure documents as they address the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples within the goals of the NATSIEP.

## **Western Australia**

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As an initiative of the Accreditation and Recognition Section of the Western Australian Department of Training, a discussion paper was circulated in August 1994 to provide information about RPL on a range of policy and implementation issues.

In September, individuals and organisations from training providers, industry, community and government as well as secondary and higher education, participated in a consultation process, referring to the discussion paper.

A number of proposals were developed from the consultations which have been incorporated in the Report on the Consultation Process. As a result of this, an RPL framework and implementation plan for Western Australia has been developed. The next step will be the establishment of a number of targets for implementing RPL within the state system.

The Western Australian Framework for the implementation of RPL provides a level of flexibility and advice which will facilitate the development of RPL policy at a local level, promoting access and equity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

### **Potential Support**

#### **Access**

The Framework for Recognition of Prior Learning stresses that RPL focuses on the needs of applicants and on the needs of disadvantaged groups, incorporating access and equity and involving the provision of adequate support for potential applicants.

Advice regarding marketing of RPL services suggests that it be 'designed to attract applications from disadvantaged groups within the community ... including Aboriginal people'.

The Framework suggests that information prepared for potential RPL applicants be comprehensive, but clear and simple, that support and advice be offered to potential applicants by people trained to undertake this role who have an understanding of access and equity issues. These themes of support, guidance and facilitating access to RPL for disadvantaged groups are present throughout the Framework.

#### **The Assessment**

The Framework offers a range of assessment methods and flexibility in the forms of evidence that can be submitted for assessment.

It also addresses the issue of language which this project has highlighted as

being an issue in assessment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples: 'Assessment methods are valid and appropriate (e.g. they do not require language competency which is greater than that required to do the job or complete the course of study)'.

### **Assessors**

RPL support people are trained and must have an understanding of equity and access issues in relation to assessment.

### **Potential Barriers**

The initial implementation stage fee schedule designates a **fee ceiling** of \$400, or \$250 concession which, being 62.5% of normal charges, is consistent with the concession rate for standard tuition fees, with fee support for disadvantaged groups. The principle applies that fees should not exceed that for equivalent tuition fees and should deliver cost savings to the college and to the individual.

Despite this, applicants may be deterred from applying for RPL given that the fee is for an assessment rather than for the delivery of a course.

Continuous monitoring of implementation will take place as well as a review of policy every twelve months. This monitoring will assist in determining whether the fee structure is actually a barrier or whether the information strategy is successful in promoting the advantages of RPL to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander potential applicants.

## **Queensland**

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In June 1994, an Administration Instruction was published by the Department of Employment, Vocational Education, Training and Industrial Relations (DEVETIR) to guide the implementation of RPL in TAFE Queensland.

A Procedures Manual was produced to support the implementation of RPL as well as a practical guide, giving background information and detailed procedures to be followed at college level.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and other targeted groups are mentioned in terms of the VETEC Social Justice Policy and Implementation Strategy and how this relates to RPL.

### **Potential Support**

Although the Procedures Manual does not provide strategies specifically for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander applicants, it offers a sound framework in

line with the NFROT Principles where marketing RPL, advice, support and guidance are outlined in the pre-assessment stage. The emphasis is on ensuring that resources provided in this stage are designed for specific audiences.

### **The Assessment**

Within the assessment, although emphasis is given to written information to support an applicant, an aspect of the assessment process that may advantage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander applicants is 'the provision for attestation from authorised persons'. This provision has the potential to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander applicants presenting for assessment, although the interpretation of 'authorised' is critical.

### **Assessor**

The assessor is required to have expertise in the relevant field and to understand assessment methodology and procedures. However, assessors are not required to be trained RPL facilitators. The applicant is given detailed feedback about their assessment and about their future study and/or appeals options.

### **Support Person**

There is also the guideline that a college register of support persons with clearly defined skills be established. This may allow Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander applicants to access information about the RPL process and for them to have support in giving due consideration to the process.

### **Potential Barriers**

The Procedures Manual provides sound principles for the implementation of RPL in Queensland but there are some areas which have the potential for throwing up barriers for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander RPL applicants, given the findings of this project.

### **Appeals**

The appeals process indicates three options for those wishing to appeal. The first is an informed approach to the teacher or assessor. This option may not be attractive to the applicant who is not assertive, suspicious of the 'system' and likely to undersell her or himself. The second and third options, however, are of more concern for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander RPL applicant. The second approach requires an appeal in writing to the Associate Director and an additional fee. The third approach requires an appeal in writing to a college Academic Appeals Committee which consists of two representatives from the college council, associate directors, the college counsellor and two nominees of the appellant.

Both of these approaches would be intimidating to the applicant, being overly bureaucratic and relying on a sophisticated level of literacy.

### Training

There is no advice for the assessor about how to support RPL applicants with special needs except that the assessor should be aware that RPL is a social justice initiative.

Although many teachers/assessors will have a sound grounding in assessment, RPL is a methodology which does require specialised knowledge, especially where there may be potential that applicants may be disadvantaged because of gender, Aboriginality, NESB or disability.

In the Procedures Manual it is stated that: 'The introduction of RPL into the TAFE system provides an ideal opportunity to ensure that the process is free of any systemic discrimination which may have occurred in the past. In the light of the current industrial reform, it is vital that **all** Australians have their skills recognised and credentialled'.

This very positive statement about the benefits of RPL pre-empts a system of recognition which builds upon existing systems and which supports 'all Australians'. RPL facilitators and assessors will need to be trained in order to assist them to provide appropriate levels of support.

### Applicant Responsibilities

The applicant is required to be well prepared for the RPL assessment by

- filling out the RPL application form as accurately and fully as possible;
- being available to negotiate with the assessor(s) about time, venue and assessment methods to be used;
- being responsible for preparing all samples of work, references and other documentation which the assessment may require; and
- if using attestation, being fully responsible for the attestor(s).

This includes

- any transport that may be required;
- ensuring that the attestor(s) understands the RPL process; and
- ensuring that the attestor(s) is well prepared for their role in the assessment.

This level of responsibility requires an applicant who is highly organised, confident and who has a clear understanding about how to access resources. The findings of this research indicate that the two latter skills are not characteristically held by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples seeking entry to courses. In addition, they may exceed the skills expected of a student

who is participating in the course of study for which recognition is being sought.

### **Support Person Responsibilities**

RPL support persons have clearly defined responsibilities regarding counselling, advice and career guidance. This role may offset some of the concerns articulated above regarding training, although there is no specification about the support person having skills in supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples or those from equity groups.

## **New South Wales**

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NSW TAFE policy on assessment on Recognition does not differentiate between RPL and other forms of recognition such as credit transfer and advanced standing. Recognition is an umbrella term used, the rationale being that this term is likely to give a clear, single message to students.

Responsibility for the administration of RPL has been devolved in institutes, with the expectation outlined in the *TAFE Gazette*, no. 1, 1995 that institutes follow certain guidelines.

### **Potential Support**

#### **Support for Applicants**

Institutes are advised that they have a responsibility to assist applicants to fill out the Recognition enrolment form, to advise the applicant about the type of documentation needed to accompany the form, to sign off the maximum amount of credit possible for standard exemptions and to implement the recognition of any non-standard exemptions where relevant. Thus if the spirit of this policy is implemented fully, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students would receive full and appropriate recognition of their skills and knowledge.

No strategies are given, however, regarding how to support applicants in identifying and documenting their skills.

#### **Timeliness**

Emphasis is given to the need for timeliness when notifying students of the results of the assessment. This project has identified that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander RPL applicants will need sufficient time to prepare for RPL assessments and to consider their study options. The emphasis on timeliness will address this need.



## Supporting Policies

Although the policy on recognition does not highlight the need to cater for disadvantaged groups (except for those of NESB), in providing recognition services it does refer to the NSW TAFE Commission policies on assessment and recognition. These policies specifically refer to issues of bias and cultural inclusiveness. In addition, students requiring further assistance are to be referred to appropriate specialist staff.

## Fees

One aspect of the NSW policy on recognition that will promote access to Recognition is that no fees are charged for the Recognition service. Instead, this service is seen as part of the overall service that TAFE NSW provides its clients.

## Providing Pathways

The NSW TAFE system emphasises the provision of specialised curriculum and programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as a more significant way of creating opportunities for promoting pathways, than through policy on recognition.

There are a number of courses and pathways specifically designed for Aboriginal students which are available in TAFE NSW. There are no entry requirements and the exit and entry point for these courses are very flexible as is progression through the course. This means that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are given recognition for prior learning in whatever form. Current courses include the Certificate in Adult Foundation, Certificate in General Education and the Tertiary Preparation Certificate.

Given the articulation arrangements and pathways in the above example, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students can receive recognition by commencing study without any formal qualifications and completing the equivalent of a Higher School Certificate without having to necessarily undertake the equivalent years of schooling. This approach has been very successful and has resulted in TAFE NSW having a disproportionate share of adult Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as students.

Recognition Awareness training has already been provided to all Aboriginal Development managers in TAFE NSW. Further training in relation to assessment and use of evidence for judgment is scheduled for Semester 2, 1995, using a train-the-trainer model. This means that by January 1996, 'There will be a pool of Aboriginal staff within institutes who are available to provide direct support to Aboriginal students in relation to assessment and recognition processes' (Susan Holland, Director, Northern Sydney Institute of TAFE and Chairperson, RPL Implementation Steering Committee).

The opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander trainees/students are certainly enhanced by such programs as those described above. However,

the findings of the research in this project stress that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples want access to mainstream courses so that they are perceived as having equality of outcomes with other Australian students.

### **Potential Barriers**

There is no differentiation made between RPL and other Recognition processes in NSW TAFE and therefore no marketing of RPL as a specific service. This has implications for the development of practices which comply with the NFROT principles of access and support. In practice, therefore, there is also less likelihood that direct promotion and support—features of sound RPL practice—will be provided to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

### **South Australia**

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The Department for Employment, Training and Further Education (DETAFFE) has published a policy document for Recognition of Prior Learning. *RPL—A Guide to Providing the Service—RPL Matters*, Department for Employment Training and Further Education, was published in 1994 as a guide for the implementation of RPL. This manual is a comprehensive publication which outlines the responsibilities of those involved in RPL assessments. It provides resources for the implementation of RPL and is closely aligned with the principles of the National Framework for the Recognition of Training.

### **Potential Support**

The following features of the policy attempt to ensure fair and equitable access to RPL for all people.

#### **Counselling**

The policy document and the procedures manual describe the availability of 'further in-depth support and counselling from appropriately trained lecturers' and that RPL applicants can 'clarify expectations with appropriately trained counsellors'. The research from this project indicates that such support will advantage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander applicants. However, it is not specified whether the counselling staff available will have the training to provide culturally appropriate support.

#### **Preparation for RPL Assessment**

In the policy there is provision for 'ready access to application material and processes which incorporate self-assessment techniques and which are suited to the client groups'. Thus there is the potential to provide cultural support for the applicant in the preparation stages of RPL assessment.

## **The Assessment**

The policy provides for 'opportunities for applicants to negotiate the methods of assessment' and to 'discuss their evidence' at a meeting with the assessor (if appropriate). Given the appropriate level of support, this approach to assessment is flexible and has the potential to accommodate the cultural needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander assessees.

## **Developing the Process**

The policy makes reference to a 'mechanism for monitoring and evaluating the RPL process ... at program and institute levels and within existing policy and frameworks for maintenance of course standards'. Given this, there is the capacity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to have input into refining the RPL process to suit cultural needs at the local level.

In the Guide, providers are advised that the development of local policy should adhere to key principles. The principles are of particular relevance to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. They include the following: that RPL shall be available to all potential applicants, that it shall involve processes that are fair to all parties involved, and that it shall involve provision of adequate support to potential applicants. If these principles are translated into practice at the local level, then Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander applicants will be greatly advantaged.

## **Potential Barriers**

### **Implementation**

In relation to 'Competency-based courses', the policy stipulates that RPL services 'will not be expected to be delivered ... where curricula is not in competency-based format or (where) competency standards do not exist'.

Such limitations on implementation may affect the large numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who apply to study courses conducted in community providers because of the supportive environment provided and because of the nature of the courses they provide. Community providers, although working toward implementing CBT curriculum, still conduct a range of courses not yet written in competency-based format.

## **Northern Territory**

Recommendation 44 of TAFEAC (TAFE Advisory Committee) Policy Decisions 1990, endorsed the following:

Recognition of Prior Learning and National Policy indicates that there should be no limit to the amount of credit granted to students able to demonstrate the required skills/competencies.

The current recognition authority of the Territory is the Northern Territory Employment and Training Authority (NTETA).

## Potential Support

### Full Recognition

Full (100%) recognition provides for the acknowledgment of a person's full range of skills and knowledge already acquired. It encourages access to training for people such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who have previously been disadvantaged by the education and training system.

In instances where partial recognition for modules is available, there is more likely to be incentive to continue with training for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who have shown they will not attend training for skills and competencies they already possess. They clearly express that this is a waste of time.

## Australian Capital Territory

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A document called *Guidelines for Educational Management* was published by the Canberra Institute of Technology encompassing RPL policy for TAFE in the ACT. This policy is contextualised by section 7 of the *Guidelines*, 'Student services and benefits', which outlines the Institute's commitment to 'promote the access, participation and successful educational outcomes of the following equal opportunity target groups ... [including] Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders'.

Section 7 of the *Guidelines* also describes the functions of the CIT Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Centre. This Centre was established to 'cater for the needs of Torres Strait Islander people who wish to pursue further education and training within the ACT and to increase the access and participation rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and to help them achieve successful outcomes in courses'.

## Potential Benefits

### Support

Given the existence and role of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Centre the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander potential RPL applicant will receive a high level of advice and assistance during the RPL process.

The RPL policy provides direction and advice regarding the RPL process which is in line with the NFROT RPL principles.

## The Assessment

The assessment process employs a range of assessment methods, trained assessors are used and the applicant is encouraged to bring with them a person who can support their application.

## Appeals

Applicants who wish to appeal are given a challenge test for the contested modules. The findings of this project indicate that this is a method of assessment often preferred by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander assessees.

## Tasmania

In February 1993, a document called *Recognition of Prior Learning: Policy Guidelines* was endorsed by the Training Authority of Tasmania. In June 1994, two further documents were published and similarly endorsed, *Assessment of Prior Learning: Guidelines for Assessors of Prior Learning in Tasmania* and *Procedural Guidelines for the Implementation of Recognition of Prior Learning*.

Since then, the Human Resources Development Unit within the Department of Industrial Relations Vocational Education and Training has developed and trialled an 'RPL Awareness Package'. It will be available in TAFE and private providers and includes basic information about the RPL process within the context of the training reforms.

## Potential Support

### Information

The *Guidelines for Assessors* make provision for the necessity to respond to the requirements of individual RPL applicants for information about the process. 'Providers are responsible for identifying a person whose responsibility will be to assist with the provision of information regarding credit that is available.'

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' requirements for information about RPL as they were expressed during the consultations for the project specifically relate to cultural needs. A responsive RPL system will develop procedures to address this.

### Counselling

Guidance and support from 'a person with a sound knowledge of the course/training program curriculum, relevant competency standards or learning outcomes' will assist with preparation for the RPL assessment. However, knowledge of the learning outcomes, without an understanding of how to ensure that there is cultural interpretation of the learning outcomes where

necessary for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander RPL applicants, may inhibit fair and valid assessment of applicants' competencies.

### **The Assessment**

The *Guidelines for Implementation* provide for post-assessment guidance to RPL applicants. In the case of Aboriginal and Torres Strait applicants, this is a positive procedure ensuring the ongoing support which may be required by applicants unfamiliar with the training system and environments. The research has indicated that many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are deterred from training in environments which do not recognise and support their cultures.

The *Guidelines for Assessors* provide guidance for the conduct of RPL interviews and refer to 'listening and attending' skills on the part of the RPL assessor. Despite the fact that there is no reference to the need to be aware of interaction with specific cultural groups, attention to the interactive stage of the process is a step in the right direction for being aware of the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander RPL assessees.

### **Appeals**

The *Guidelines* allow for a procedure which can be used if the RPL process used 'has not complied with the recognition of prior learning principles identified by the NFROT'.

Should an RPL assessment of an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person have been conducted without fair and equitable processes, the appeal procedures established will be of benefit.

### **Potential Barriers**

#### **The Assessment**

The *Guidelines for Assessors* document emphasises the importance for RPL assessors to be trained in 'RPL methodology prior to conducting an assessment'. While this will address the maintenance of a quality approach to the process, it may not respond to the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander applicants if assessors are not trained in cultural awareness.

The research has indicated that it is crucial that RPL assessor/facilitators assessing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are not only aware of the culture of applicants but that they have built up a degree of trust with these applicants.

## Application

The *Guidelines for Assessors* indicate that an application form must be filled out together with supporting evidence for a claim for RPL. This method of application will not be appropriate for students with low literacy skills.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander RPL applicants may require assistance from a culturally aware person with whom there has been established contact, in order to fill out an application form.

The format of the application form is also an important consideration for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander applicants. Attention to language and design may be critical to enhance access to the process.

## Victoria

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The Office of Training and Further Education has published the *Course Accreditation Application Guide* endorsed by the Vocational Education and Training Accreditation Board, July 1994. The section called 'Principles of Accreditation' in the appendix of this document, outlines the criteria by which course proponents may confirm that their application meets the minimum requirements under each principle.

The accreditation Principle 4 deals with multiple entry and exit and stipulates that the minimum requirements for compliance with this principle are that the course document describes arrangements for Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL). These arrangements should be consistent with the National Framework RPL requirements as outlined below.

The process for recognising prior learning will provide for:

- assessment or evidence of the accumulated learning experiences of an individual in relation to the required competency;
- applicants to provide evidence of how their prior experiences relate to the required competencies of the selected course;
- a range of techniques to assess accurately the competencies held;
- support mechanisms to encourage and facilitate applicants' use of the process;
- clear criteria for deciding whether or not to grant recognition;
- a review phase.

## Potential support

### Range of Assessment Methods

The range of assessment methods referred to will allow for the inclusion of culturally appropriate assessment methods.



### **Support of Applicants**

The inclusion of support mechanisms may provide for culturally appropriate support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander applicants.

### **Potential Barriers**

This document is not comprehensive enough to give providers guidance and direction about strategies with which to meet the NFROT principles. There is no mention of the specific needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander applicants in the RPL process and for procedures to ensure that these are met.

### **Fees**

There is no OTFE advice available to colleges regarding fees for RPL assessments, except for the principle that the fee charged should not exceed the cost of tuition. Given this, the information available to prospective students regarding fees is not consistent across providers of Education and Training.

## 9 Maori and RPL—Good Practice

### 9.1 RPL and Culture

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The information gathered through the literature search on developments of RPL in New Zealand shows some similarities with the concerns, issues and priorities raised by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples about the RPL process during the consultations for this project. In addition, there are elements of RPL good practice identified in the Maori teacher training area, which could inform approaches to RPL staff development for indigenous peoples in Australia.

According to Nena Benton, in *Recognition of Prior Learning: From Hegemony to Symphony*, RPL is viewed by Maori as a model for valuing experiential learning, that is, 'learning by doing without classroom instruction'. The importance of experiential learning for Maori has been emphasised in the movements initiated within Maori communities to counteract assimilation and to revitalise Maori language and culture.

The emphasis on experiential learning for developing approaches to RPL for Maori is that 'the formal recognition of prior experiential learning can pave the way to redressing the situation for all those who have not really been part of the formal education system beyond primary school'.

Benton goes on to say, 'If these people can be helped through ... RPL ... to avail themselves of alternative learning opportunities, their lives can be transformed in ways that would benefit them and the society in which they live. One key lies in the creativity with which the formal education system can find meaningful links with homes, the workplace, special interest groups and other settings for out-of-school learning' (Benton 1991, pp. 31–2).

As Benton says,

The proposal put here is to recognise prior learning, not only for admission purposes and exemption from certain course requirements but also for discovering where applicants are when they apply ... The awarding of credit to prior experiential learning is in keeping with Maori initiatives to revitalise their language and culture and efforts to empower the young. It has symbolic and practical significance for all minority groups not only in New Zealand but wherever they have been marginalised as a result of the introduction of ... a western type of education from outside. There is a need to assess prior learning not only for the purpose of awarding credit but also to signal the recognition of the learner as a partner in the learning process with an active role in the production and synthesis of knowledge.

The systematic assessment of prior experiential learning ... could encourage Maori people to keep building on their experiences in life ... This has positive implications for other marginalised groups.

(Benton 1991)

The findings of this project indicate that there are similar priorities expressed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples affecting the development of RPL for their communities. For example, the issues raised by participants in the consultations concerning the interpretation of the benchmark for RPL assessment and the requirements of cultural support in the RPL process are directly related to the need to acknowledge and maintain culture and language.

## 9.2 RPL Developments in New Zealand

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### 9.2.1 The New Zealand Qualifications Authority

In *Recognition of Prior Learning: From Hegemony to Symphony*, Nena Benton points out that the New Zealand Qualifications Authority has endorsed Maori initiatives in revitalising culture and language. She writes:

Maori achievements and retention rates in education and training improve when the Maori language and culture are the media for the acquisition and transmission of any knowledge, skills, attitudes and values.

They (Maori) are demanding the appropriate recognition of Maori knowledge, skills, values, attitudes and attributes and arguing their relevance to New Zealand's development towards a progressive country able to compete in the changing technological world.

The proper recognition of qualifications from a Maori base will assist many students to have access to a wider choice of career paths ... fulfil their potential to contribute positively to the future of the Maori people and thereby benefit the nation ... take the credits achieved from one Maori based education and training centre to another, or to other centres within the mainstream.

(Benton 1991)

Unlike the Australian Qualification Framework, the New Zealand Qualifications Authority has been set up as a bicultural model. Further examination of the possible benefits of this approach need to be carried out to inform Australian practice in this area.

### 9.2.2 Teacher Training

In New Zealand there are initiatives in the teacher training area and in local communities to involve people in the documentation of prior learning through **attestation**. Attestation is a process used in the RPL process for Maori when

a student's suitability to enter, or hold credits towards, a course of training, is affirmed by respected members of an ethnic or other community. The attestation may be combined with other forms of assessment of experiential learning. In New Zealand there will be need to recognise learning which arises from a purely Maori base ... Attestation is already in use to support alternative entry to colleges of education.

(NZQA 1991, p. 40)

However, as Benton says, 'attestation is more valid and reliable when combined with other modes of assessment, e.g. structured and/or unstructured interviews, situational observation and product assessment. A composite portfolio could well include attestation to complement the use of direct evidence e.g. work samples' (Benton 1991).

It is important, she says, that 'credit towards a degree or other higher qualification should be given only for learning outcomes that can be demonstrated to be in unquestionable quality at the appropriate level.'

The following Maori RPL case study illustrates the role of attestation and the definition of the learning outcomes in the assessment of competency in teacher training. The case study shows the way RPL is introduced into the Te Rangakura Teachers Training Program to reinforce the cultural appropriateness of the training and training outcomes.

### ***Case Study 16: RPL in the Te Rangakura Teacher Training Program—New Zealand***

*The Te Rangakura teacher training program has been offered at the Whanganui Polytechnic for the last five years. The complete program requires four years of study.*

*The program was designed by the Maori peoples of the Whanganui area in conjunction with teacher training staff. The program has been nationally approved and accredited by a group consisting of representatives from traditional people, the New Zealand Qualifications Authority, teaching bodies and trade unions. It is a model of a highly skills-based course, delivered both in the field and in formal classroom settings, and closely involves the Whanganui community at every stage of its development and delivery. RPL is embedded in this course in a uniquely Maori style outlined as follows:*

*Prior to gaining entrance to the course, a potential student or trainee teacher is selected by the community on the basis of his or her knowledge of the customs and cultural heritage of the local people. The community attests to the student's cultural skills and knowledge which has been maintained by people brought up in the traditional Maori culture. This knowledge is referred to as the 'old world'.*

*Student selection for the teacher training course is therefore made by the Maori community and not by staff at the Whanganui Polytechnic.*

*Once the student is selected, he or she enters an 18 week introductory stage of the teacher training program. During this time, the student's skills and*

knowledge are assessed by the Polytechnic staff in relation to the learning outcomes of the teacher training course. Currency of the student's skills and knowledge is a major concern. Skills and knowledge the student already has are identified so that he or she can concentrate on learning in areas of study or practice which are new to him or her or in which the student is not currently competent.

The learning outcomes of the course are written in broad and flexible competency statements which are aligned with national competency standards.

On appearance the learning outcomes may not resemble the 'old world' knowledge required by the Whanganui people for competent teachers in their community. However, the learning outcomes have been developed by local Maori people who in addition to knowing the 'old world', are knowledgeable about the 'new world' and the 'modern world'. The new world is what the Maori refer to as the European colonising culture. The modern world refers to more recent Maori culture which exists between the old and new worlds, but is neither of these. Many Maori relate in their daily lives to the modern world and communicate in a 'modern' Maori language.

The curriculum writers of the Te Rangakura teacher training program must know the differences between these worlds and the ways in which they are linked. The learning outcomes are assessed by ensuring that the student can interweave knowledge from these three worlds.

Current knowledge of the three worlds may be assessed by a simulation exercise which draws out the student's knowledge and assists with determining whether it is transferable between the Maori world views. For example, a student's knowledge or skill as expressed in traditional Maori language or terms, may be recognised and assessed as transferable to equivalent knowledge of the 'modern world'. The student is therefore deemed competent in the particular learning outcome.

The learning outcomes of the course determine the whole assessment/ recognition process. Are the learning outcomes broad and flexible enough to accommodate valid and reliable assessment of competence in the new, modern and old worlds? The assessment process and the learning outcomes are paramount, as ability to protect and maintain local Maori culture is a crucial attribute of a trained Maori teacher.

During the course of each student's teacher training, representatives from the local tribes interview the teacher trainers to ensure the quality of the assessment process. Tribal people are not actually present during the 2. In

*assessment process, but they are watching over the assessors to ensure that the standards of the training institution in conjunction with those of the local tribal people are validated.*

(This information was made available by staff at the Whanganui Polytechnic, New Zealand.)

This case study illustrates

- the role of the community in attesting to the competencies of its members
- the importance of incorporating cultural perspectives in the development of the learning outcomes of training
- appropriateness of assessment strategies to draw out the transferability of skills where apparent
- responsibility for the quality of the RPL process maintained by the community.

# 10 Conclusion

The time constraints on the consultation stage of this project limited the potential for more adequate consultation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Despite this, the main objectives of the project were fulfilled. With a more realistic time frame, the project outcomes would have reflected more comprehensively the issues, concerns and priorities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in relation to RPL.

In order to develop appropriate RPL processes and related staff development programs meeting the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and the goals of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy (NATSIEP), the following must be noted:

- 1 Some RPL and recognition practices currently exist for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. These practices and the way they are implemented depend upon local situations, such as the degree to which there is access to NVETS, the interest and demand for NVETS by the local community or groups, the awareness and sensitivity of local NVETS providers and the amount of relevant staff training in local providers.

Some of the existing practices are guided by the NFROT principles and have the potential to meet the goals of the NATSIEP. Others do not provide for local cultural needs nor are they underpinned by the goals of access, equity and self-determination expressed in the NATSIEP.

- 2 In view of the above, the development of culturally appropriate RPL or other recognition practices must build upon existing examples of good practice in recognition identified in this research. **RPL processes available for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples must be flexible, accessible, equitable and appropriate to local cultural needs.**

Assistance must be provided to overcome the barriers for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the NVETS, in line with the goals of the NATSIEP.

- 3 The broad criteria upon which initiatives in the area of RPL staff development for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples should be based are:

## **(i) Self Determination—NATSIEP Goals Nos 1–12**

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Adequate time and resourcing for communities at the local level to determine priorities and processes in relation to RPL which enable:

- the development of appropriate information about RPL for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and groups at the local level
- adequate time for reflection and evaluation of the process to ensure the needs of communities and groups are being met



- appropriate information about existing barriers in the NVETS to access to training, employment and recognition.

## **(ii) Equitable Access—NATSIEP Goals Nos 13–16**

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Cultural considerations regarding language, customs, values, and priorities to be maintained through appropriate support for RPL applicants.

Development of curriculum and flexible delivery modes to address the principles of equity in the development of learning outcomes for recognition and assessment.

## **(iii) Participation and Decision Making—NATSIEP Goals Nos 17–21**

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Mechanisms whereby Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities at the local level can participate in determining the processes for establishing culturally appropriate RPL.

Adequate resourcing to promote the potential benefit and relevance of RPL.

## Further Acknowledgments

The project team would like to thank the following people who have provided input to this project during the national consultations.

### Australian Capital Territory

University of Canberra  
ACT Aboriginal Education  
Consultative Group (AECG)

Suzanne O'Neil

Shenee McFadyen  
Yodie Batzke  
Kaye Price  
George Wilson  
Karen Carney

Caloola Training Centre

Federal Attorney General's  
Department

John Williams-Mozley  
Hans Batzke

### New South Wales

Aboriginal Development Division (ADD),  
Sydney Institute of Technology

Rachel Carney  
Pam Gill  
Shane Williams  
Ray Hatfield  
Margaret Trindall  
Gloria Provest  
Leonard Hill  
Tony Slater

Hunter Institute of Technology  
New England Institute of TAFE  
Western Institute of TAFE  
Illawarra Institute of Technology  
Sydney Institute of Technology  
Southern Sydney Institute of TAFE  
South Western Sydney Institute  
Western Sydney Institute  
Open Training & Education Network  
Tranby College, Sydney

Di Roberts  
Hilton Naden  
Andrew Batchelor  
Iris White  
Kristine Garrett  
Bill Powell  
Cathy Gerloff  
Heather Porter  
Pam Jackson  
Jack Beetson  
Helen Bell  
Chris Noel

Illawarra Institute of Technology

## Northern Territory

Aboriginal Development Division, Darwin	Lenore Dembski Michelle Howard Coralie Achterberg Lee Clarke
Batchelor College, Batchelor	John Henry Jack Frawley David Benn Alison Warell Helen Clark Emma Collins Barbara Tynan
Batchelor College, Katherine	
CAAPS (Centre for Aboriginal Alcohol Program Services), Darwin	Michael Growney Judie Kay Barbara Nassir
ALPA (Arnhem Land Progress Association), Darwin	Betty Cunningham Ellen Gapan Gaykamaŋu Wally Fejo Shirley Gundhumawuy
Nungalinga College, Darwin	
Northern Territory University	Sean Byrne David Weight John Pennington Rick Ralph David Calland Sheryl Heally Gary Robinson Roger Davies Greg Smith
Faculty of Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Studies, NT University	Bill Langlands Wally Nickels Cathie Nickels Helen Burgess Sue Stanton Shane Motla Rae Flanning Stephen Ushay
Skillshare, Katherine	
Aboriginal Liaison, Ranger Uranium, Jabiru	Ralph Blyth Robert Manley Helen Gillespie Ceinwen Grose
Jawoyn Association, Jabiru	Helen Spiers Andrew Spiers
Network for Vocational Training, Jabiru	

Kalano Association, Katherine  
Aboriginal Development Unit, Alice  
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Tangentyere Council, Alice Springs  
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NT Police, Alice Springs  
Akaltje Centre, Centralian College,  
Alice Springs  
Gillen Primary School  
Ross Park Primary School  
Northern Territory Rural College,  
Katherine  
Batchelor College, Alice Springs

Centralian College, Alice Springs

Alice Springs SkillShare  
DEET, Alice Springs  
Northern Territory Employment,  
Training and Education Authority  
Centre for Appropriate Technology,  
Alice Springs

Central Australian Family Resource  
Centre, Alice Springs

Greg Barron

John Wagner  
Maureen McGregor  
Vicky Cameron  
Patricia Rose  
Moogie Patu  
Kevin Wirri  
Richard Swan  
Glenda Forrester  
Robert Palmer  
Robert Robertson  
Veronica Golder

Patrick Ah Kit  
Bob Randall  
Debra Maidment  
Margy Hayes-Hampton  
Deborah Durnan

Bess Price

Jeanne Liddle  
Rosanna DeSantis

Sharon Spencer  
Robert Clair  
Cynthia Mallard

Geoff Gaskell  
Colleen Carlon  
Sue L AhChee  
Anthony Pilkington  
Bob Boughton  
David Reilly  
John Reid  
Alan Harrison  
Peter Strachan

Allan McGill

Ron Talbot  
Kurt Seemann

Trish Cashman  
Claudia Preston Manu

Department of Administrative Services,  
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 Clair Andersen  
 Representatives from the majority of NT Industry Training Boards

### Queensland

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Huonville Adult Education Centre

Adult Education Centre, Burnie

Adult Education Centre, Circular Head

Adult Education Centre, Smithton

Adult Education Centre, Burnie

Aboriginal Access, Devonport

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# Appendix

The following case studies and information were provided by participants in the consultations. They have been included here to provide information in addition to the case studies found in the body of the report.

## Case Study 2 (continued): Nelly—NSW

(see pp. 40 and 45 for full case study)

For the purposes of the RPL project Nelly reflected on an earlier process which valued Aboriginal people but which, until now, seems to have been forgotten. In her possession she had a document which was a media release in 1985, entitled 'Historic recognition of Aboriginality as a qualification in TAFE'. It relates to upgrading the status of Aboriginal Liaison Officers in TAFE. In the media release, the then Minister for Education, Rodney Cavalier is quoted as saying:

It is the first time in the history of the public sector of New South Wales and as I understand it the whole of Australia, that a determination has been brought down on the grounds of Aboriginality. That is because Aboriginality of these employees is essential to their effective discharge of the job.

Their empathy, their knowledge, their understanding, their compassion and their ability to translate the difficulties at the coalface of the work they are doing are at least equal to any academic qualifications that other coordinators employed by TAFE might possess.

It is an important step by this Government in recognising the role of Aborigines employed in the public sector and their growing importance within it.

## Case Study 4: Frank—NT

(see p. 42 for the rest of this case study)

Frank is a construction industry worker near the Milingimbi community. He has been working in the building industry in his community for the last ten to fifteen years. He has completed some building skills related courses over a long period and has statements of attainment for modules in one of these courses. As are many of the community people, he is very keen to gain a credential in the building trades.

The community has made clear that its people are not interested in any soft options or watered down courses, but require qualifications at the industry's national standards.

Frank applied for RPL in the **Certificate in Construction**, a newly accredited course, on the basis of his extensive work experience. He was granted RPL for the whole course minus 2.5 modules in the areas of first aid, scaffolding and brickwork. On the basis of the RPL assessment, he has been granted first year in the Certificate in Carpentry and Joinery and some modules in year two of the apprenticeship.

### RPL Process

The panel assessing Frank consisted of the course coordinator from the NTU, the builder from the local council (employer) and a qualified RPL assessor.

The builder was able to verify that John could do the job at the standard required. The coordinator ensured that the assessment outcome was valid and reliable.

Frank was happy to be granted RPL as this would ensure that he has the skills required to work as a skilled builder's assistant in his community. Skilled workers are an important part of the community development and relieve the community of having to employ outsiders to complete jobs.

### Issues

- Currently, the financial cost of making the RPL facilitator and an assessor available for RPL assessment in remote communities is high. Airfares to and from remote communities are high as is the cost of accommodation in these areas. Another cost is incurred if the teaching load of the RPL panel needs replacing.
- The applicants were assessed for RPL by people with whom they were comfortable and familiar. The NTU has been working in remote communities for some time and is clear about the importance of its staff's cultural sensitivity, empathy and the need to be known by the community.
- When communities request any kind of assessment from the NTU, arrangements are made for interpreters if language is a possible barrier to fair assessment.

The RPL assessor provided the following information to assist with developing a culturally appropriate approach to RPL for Aboriginal people in remote communities:

- For some Aboriginal people time is not an issue. It is the achievement that counts, not the time it may take to gain this achievement for the purpose of RPL.
- The assessment methods have to be flexible. For example, an RPL assessor can ask the applicant did he do a certain task, and lead him or her into the area to be assessed without being too technical.
- Trust is an important factor. The applicant has to feel that the non-

Aboriginal assessor will accept his or her style and manner of communicating. (For example, it may be appropriate to sit with the applicant in his or her place of activity or work.) Otherwise, the Aboriginal applicant may be too shy and not stay around for any type of assessment.

- The place for the RPL assessment is very important. It may be somewhere the applicant finds familiar and comfortable. Often an office is not suitable.
- There may be a number of reasons why it is difficult for an Aboriginal person being assessed to talk. The problems may be linguistic or to do with the person's feelings of discomfort or shyness with the assessor.

Words do not have to be a necessary part of an RPL assessment dealing with practical skills. Many people can communicate clearly without words and an assessor should be aware of this.

If no response or monosyllabic answers to queries are seen as a problem, a support person who knows the applicant should be part of the RPL procedure.

### Case Study 9 (continued): RPL Pilot Study—FNQ

(see p. 58 for a description of the RPL procedures adopted for this pilot study)

Some issues which affected RPL as expressed by the RPL pilot project staff:

#### Training System

- Modules in the mechanics trades are not available to people who are not apprenticed. If this continues to be the case, RPL will not advantage many members of the community's industry employees. Apparently this situation will change within the next two years.
- Some accredited plant operators courses are not available from TAFE. RPL will therefore not be an advantage to people who might otherwise enrol in these courses. (A Category A Plant Operator's course is available at Logan TAFE. It does not cover all mobile plant operations, e.g. backhoe, grader.)
- RPL in the building trade courses may become a longer procedure than other skills recognition procedures which also result in fast-tracking training. This may be because RPL is difficult to explain and gathering evidence takes time.

There is also the problem of courses not yet developed to accept enrolments from people who are not apprenticed.

#### Community

- In some communities suitable machinery for 'testing' purposes for course delivery is not available. This also has an impact on the availability of RPL.

- It is often difficult to get assessors (for assessment and for RPL) to come out to communities due to the distance and cost.
- Community people are very reluctant to enrol in courses if it means training away from the community. Local trainers are needed and/or teachers from outside who are willing to stay in the community.
- Acquiring a qualification for community people does not necessarily guarantee an increase in salary. Most communities rely on CDEP wages with no immediate scope for higher pay for more skills attained. Therefore there can often be little incentive to seek training and RPL. Most important determinant!
- Training and RPL must fit in with the overall concept of community development and community benefit. The council is likely to reject plans which do not address community needs.

There can be fear that training will lead to individuals leaving the community or being rejected as having deserted the community's needs for individual aspirations.

### Cultural

- To conduct RPL in remote communities there are some important considerations to be aware of. Community and/or cultural events will take priority and may mean it is not possible to keep to planned schedules for training and assessment. The community may not be available due to:
  - the dugong hunting season
  - funerals
  - work commitments (e.g. finishing roadwork in the dry season)
  - weather (e.g. cyclones)
  - other TAFE courses currently running in the community which people want to attend.
- A reliable contact person in each community is necessary to alert the TAFE officer of events occurring in the community which might result in a change of plans for RPL.
- The course learning outcomes must be written so that it is easy for the community to translate them into their own experiences with the help of the course expert.
- The business of getting assessors to the community is difficult and complex. Not only does the assessor have to be the right one for the job with appropriate qualifications, but he or she must be a supportive and culturally sensitive person. An assessor must have the attitudes of 'helping' people through the RPL process and not of appearing to screen people out by the process.

- People in communities require a lot of information and education about the benefits of training, let alone RPL (e.g. it is important that communities understand that while training is happening there will be less production. However, once people are trained, production should be higher. It is as if a 'training mentality' needs to be developed.)
- The early stages of RPL, that is, informing communities and getting their interest and answering questions about it, must be done by people who understand the community. RPL must be explained and then implemented in stages, at a pace required by the community.
- The language used about RPL must be appropriate to the community. For example, the term 'RPL' or 'Recognition of Prior Learning' is rarely used.
- It is important that the benefits of RPL are not over-emphasised, especially while the process is not available. Setting up disappointment must be avoided (e.g. it must be made clear whether a pay rise or a job prospect is likely or not).

### Conclusion

There should be adequate staff development to ensure fair, accessible and flexible RPL is available. This should cover the practical techniques RPL assessors require. It should also include workshopping all the practical issues, such as the ones that have been raised through this RPL pilot study.

While there is need to maintain continuity with the RPL process (so as not to have too long a gap between visits), it is important to progress cautiously and fit in with communities. Implementers of RPL must fit the process to the community.

The TAFE staff believe RPL will be of great advantage to people in remote communities. However, a project officer has not yet been employed to extend the work undertaken during the pilot study.

### Case Study 12 (continued): Cape Slattery Silica Mine, FNQ

(see pp. 70 and 71 for the rest of this case study)

The mine is situated on the Cape York Peninsula within an Aboriginal Reserve. Of its employees, 55% are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from the surrounding communities.

Six Aboriginal supervisors have been trained as a result of the company's decision to provide recognised training to enable employees to progress in the career path structure from entry level to supervisory and management positions. Each level of advancement is tied to a level of training attained.

Qualifications may be gained through distance learning and other flexible

delivery strategies with company assistance covering costs and on site tutorial assistance. The company meets regularly with the Aboriginal communities, unions and Aboriginal community development officers to discuss training development and delivery.

## **Trade Training**

Training materials have been adapted to suit the Aboriginal trainees. Modules are delivered by Aboriginal trainers who are mostly Elders from the community who have completed customised train-the-trainer courses.

The trainers have played a vital role in the curriculum design process and are therefore able to cater for the language needs and learning styles of the Aboriginal trainees. Rather than deliver separate modules in literacy and numeracy, the module language is modified to ensure that the content is transferred from Aboriginal person to Aboriginal person.

## **Recognition of Prior Learning Process**

One hundred employees have been assessed for RPL for the first stage of the Mining Certificate. The RPL process is as follows:

- External assessors trained in RPL were brought in from the Queensland School of Mines (Rockhampton). The assessors were introduced to the activities of the company and to the fact that it is situated in the midst of Aboriginal communities. The employees have had no formal training, but often have had years of working on the mine as well as a variety of relevant previous life and work experience.
- The assessors spent five days discussing the RPL process with the applicants and trade unionists and making necessary arrangements for the RPL assessments.
- Another five days were spent doing the RPL assessments. Each person was assessed against the benchmarks on a one-to-one basis and was granted RPL for Level 1 of the Certificate.
- As the module delivery was developed by the Aboriginal trainers, the background, experiences and knowledge of the trainees is taken into consideration in the development of the learning outcomes.

The applicants did not require a support person for their RPL assessment as the competencies they had acquired from work and life experiences had already been taken into consideration during the training by the Aboriginal trainers. In other words, the cultural support is provided during the training and is not so much needed during assessment.

- RPL for Level 2 of the Certificate will be offered in July.



### Case Study 17: Herman—QLD

Herman was granted RPL in three of the eleven modules of the **Certificate in Community Management**. This course is conducted for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community council workers and for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisation administrators. It is conducted 100% off-campus, is self-paced with flexible modes of delivery including computer-aided learning and videos etc.

Five out of the eleven modules are national modules. These have been amended to suit the client group. For example, council funding must reflect the CDEP which accounts for much of its workers' wages and therefore the terms of accountability for the local councils.

#### Background

For the last twenty years, Herman worked as project officer and council clerk in Aboriginal communities around Queensland.

He was an experienced researcher, administrator and manager. He had plenty of evidence to substantiate his claim for RPL. This included: references from previous employers highlighting the range of his skills and knowledge, examples of submissions he had written, research papers, funding proposals, copies of minutes of meetings he had taken and those for which he had organised and run. He was quite confident with the RPL process and had no trouble putting together his evidence and claiming for RPL.

### Case Study 18: Alf—QLD

Alf moved from a remote community to study to be a teacher in Cairns. He worked for five years as a teacher aid and taught classes of his own in that time. He had also undertaken some courses of study in TAFE.

Alf applied for RPL for the 230 hour module **Curriculum Studies 2** in the **Certificate in Community Teaching**. A course tutor assisted him with his RPL application and with interpreting the syllabus document.

An RPL committee was set up consisting of three people—the trained RPL facilitator, a course expert (teacher) and a registered Aboriginal teacher from the Education Department. The committee met and studied the application and then based on this, set-up a 'testing' situation. Alf was asked to demonstrate his teaching skills in the classroom and answer a number of questions in a subsequent discussion with the panel.

Apparently, there was no-one from Alf's community who had seen him teach. The committee decided that demonstration was the best way to assess him. He was granted RPL for the entire module.

## Case Study 19: Lisa—WA

Lisa enrolled in the Associate Diploma of Education (Community Teaching) but was unable to undertake the compulsory field trip (two weeks in Western Australia). She sought RPL for the field trip module based on her claim to having the required knowledge through reading and her previous work experience.

This was accepted but she was asked to observe a school in the process of 'Aboriginalising' curricula and methods of teaching. She was later questioned about it. She was also questioned about her own experience in this area and then required to write a report on the topic 'Aboriginalisation of Education' based on her readings, her observations in the school and the discussion with the RPL team.

She was happy with this process because it meant she did not have to go on the field trip. However, her claim for RPL demanded a lot of her time and proved to be a very rigorous assessment.

Issues affecting the implementation of RPL as expressed by the TAFE staff:

- A misunderstanding exists amongst staff that RPL is an assessment which has to be based on direct observation or test. This may deter applicants because the time involved to make a claim for RPL may be excessive.  
There is also belief that an RPL 'committee' must consist of three people. However, it is clear that three may be too many for some applicants, and in other cases, too few. Setting up a committee of more than one person can be a time-consuming process. The RPL process must be flexible.
- If partial RPL cannot be granted, this can be a deterrent to potential RPL applicants. If the knowledge Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders bring to the course is not going to be accepted unless it is linked to all the prescribed elements as set down in a module, this can lead to confusion and bad feelings and result in withdrawal from RPL and training opportunities.  
If partial RPL is granted then mechanisms which effectively record which sections of the module have been RPL'd need to be put in place.
- Selection interviews for courses in TAFE include a community person on the interview panel. Some aspects of RPL may be introduced during this interview. For example,
  - learning outcomes of the course
  - ensuring that the community person on the panel is chosen by the applicant
  - making the interview a preparation for RPL.

- To expedite RPL for students living in remote communities who are studying distance education programs, RPL may be effectively carried out as an interview only process. The procedure to make this a reality may be:
  - 1 Institution receives applications for course entry.
  - 2 Interviewer peruses applications and gets at least a rough idea of those applicants who are potential RPL applicants. Interviewer makes notes of what they would need to see/find out in order to grant RPL and in what units.
  - 3 Interviewer travels to community to interview applicants. Applicants bring along community support and qualifications, references etc.
  - 4 Interview doubles as RPL activity.
  - 5 If applicant accepted into course and enrolls in course, RPL has already been done. This would overcome the tyranny of distance which makes RPL for students living away from the institution so difficult.

### Case Study 20: Bamaga, Queensland

Two people from the local community were granted RPL in carpentry and joinery modules. The Community Development Coordinator (employed by TAFE to cover five communities) assisted them with their RPL applications and with gathering evidence for their claim.

The RPL granted was based on their work experience which consisted of employment under CDEP and with the local council, and previously with the Department of Family Services. They had references from their employers.

Another two men at Injinoo will be applying for RPL in these areas.

#### **Issues affecting RPL in remote communities as expressed by TAFE staff:**

- In these cases, RPL was easy to grant because people in the community had seen them working and knew of their work standards.
- In other licensed trades (plumbing and electrical) RPL is not accepted. This is a disincentive for people on communities, especially when other industries accept RPL. It would be better if people could receive a 'restricted qualification' through RPL rather than none at all. This would help with motivation and incentive to improve skills and undertake training opportunities.
- It is important in communities that there be more local skilled people so that there is no longer any need to employ outside contractors for work to be done.

In the future, it will be better if Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

people are the employers, the employees, and the planners of community development. It is important that Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders are recognised as the industry themselves and are in control of all the issues.

### **Case Study 21: Automotive Industry, NT**

#### **RPL Progress**

- local community council and/or CDEP is the employer
- literacy/numeracy test (or Year 10) identifies levels at which students enter automotive trade courses. However, the student may undertake technical modules and acquire literacy/numeracy levels in parallel with acquiring other skills.
- industry-based open learning literacy and numeracy program for current employees to improve access to modules
- funding for an RPL process through Special Intervention Program (DEET program for unemployed)
- training record book developed by industry, which lists skills (industry standards) at each course level, is used to assist with RPL. However, the assessor will represent the body authorised to conduct the module/course.
- evidence portfolio for each student is developed as competencies are acquired
- assistance with compiling evidence portfolio for student comes from local Aboriginal 'community mechanic' who has a recognised training and assessment role in the community
- office managers in each community (often DEET employed) also play a supportive role
- assessment is made on what has already been demonstrated, no further assessment or discussion of competencies
- planned further RPL training for community mechanics and office managers.

(This is not clearly RPL, but it is a more supportive and culturally appropriate method of assessment for Aboriginal people, ensuring competencies learned on the job are recognised in relation to course modules).

### **Case Study 22: Advanced Certificate in Health Promotion Practice (Aboriginal health workers)**

- piloting the training with RPL built in
- funded by Health and Community Services

- identification of competencies acquired from work experience done in groups supported by trained RPL staff from H & CS. Groups formed from employees working in one local area, supporting each other with this process.
- local Aboriginal Training Officers are course experts during RPL assessment
- planning to train Senior Aboriginal Health Promotion Officers (who already have a support role for local staff) to be RPL facilitators and provide ongoing support for RPL applicants as required.

### **Case Study 23: Certificate in Horticultural Skills (Aboriginal Communities, NT)**

This level one certificate course in CBT is sensitive to the cultural requirements of the Aboriginal student participants. Important cultural considerations determine the content, delivery and assessment methods.

- Direct questioning in some cases is inappropriate, considered rude.
- Collaborative learning is culturally appropriate, rather than individual attention and assessment.
- The program is conducted 100% on-the-job and is maintained in an informal style.
- Course trainers have to be known by the community.
- Potential Aboriginal trainers in the community are utilised. If necessary, non-Aboriginal trainers (through an established network) are brought in.

The program is designed to recognise learning opportunities as they arise through community development projects. Training is structured around individual community development needs.

All students in the group wanting to be involved in the training and community development are enrolled. Even if a particular student has more experience and knowledge than others in the group, he or she still wants to be part of getting the job done. Obtaining credentials is not usually a priority.

Once training begins, assessment is ongoing as competencies are achieved. Some members of the group may finish the course earlier than others. But the project will continue until it is finished with all members of the group participating. On site trainers/project managers record ongoing assessment of competence via a student log book. Moderation of assessment is conducted periodically by NTU course coordinators.

If needed, additional competencies will be provided by the trainers, to get the job done. RPL in this context, is integrated into the regular assessment procedures for the program.

### **Case Study 24: Plumbing Trade, NT**

Four people from Maningreda were granted RPL in the plumbing trade. The cost of providing the assessor was very high. More RPL assessments are planned.

Concern about RPL in the trade areas:

- The Northern Territory University may use course work and assessment for off-the-job components of modules because there is a perceived reluctance in the system to issue credentials/licences for people who have been granted RPL.

### **Case Study 25: Issues for RPL in Remote Communities, NT**

- Training of local community Aboriginal personnel in RPL ensures:
  - availability of an RPL facilitator within the community without cost/time of bringing an outsider in. However, it will be some time before local people are trained RPL facilitators and assessors.
  - cultural appropriateness of support (e.g. interpreting, liaising with assessors etc.) and assessment methods.
- Using existing training and assessment provisions and building an RPL process on to this. Therefore RPL will not be seen as something brand new and in addition, requiring further resources. RPL will advance what has already been established in terms of community development, utilising existing staff and time available for training/assessment.
- Culturally appropriate RPL incorporated into existing practice can improve access to training by ensuring recognition of life and work competencies already acquired in the local community environment.
- Where culturally appropriate delivery of course is developed, RPL and other methods of assessment are more likely to be relevant to the learning styles of Aboriginal people.

# Glossary

## **advanced standing**

A training organisation may grant advanced standing in a course of study if an applicant can show that he/she has already got the skills or knowledge that the course would provide. Where advanced standing is granted the applicant would not have to attend classes for that unit/module/ subject(s).

## **assessment**

The process by which a judgment is made about whether competence has been achieved in terms of the benchmark (learning outcome, competency standard).

## **assessment criteria**

An assessor in the RPL process uses a number of criteria to judge whether competence has been achieved. These are: authenticity, currency, quality, relevance, transferability, validity and sufficiency (from *RPL Training and Application Manual for Education*, Kangan Institute of TAFE).

## **assessor**

A person who has the necessary subject knowledge and skills to judge or decide whether competence has been achieved by an applicant in a specific area. In an RPL assessment the assessor may be called the 'benchmark expert'.

## **benchmark**

A general term used to describe a reference point or standard that is set for measuring or judging something—for example, a person's skills, knowledge and abilities in a certain area. The term benchmark is used in both training and industry and in the context of assessment can refer to learning outcomes of a course of study, competency standards, enterprise standards, job standards.

## **competency standards**

Standards that contain the specification of the knowledge and skill and the application of that knowledge and skill to the standard of performance required in employment (*User's Guide to Course Maintenance Processes for System Wide Quality Assurance*, State Training Board, Victoria).

## **credit transfer**

A training organisation may give credit or exemption from attending classes in a subject or unit, for study which has already been completed in another training organisation (in Australia or overseas).



**curriculum**

A plan which outlines a structured series of intended learning outcomes and their associated learning experiences. These are usually organised as a related combination or series of units/modules/elements (*User's Guide to Course Maintenance Processes for System Wide Quality Assurance*, State Training Board, Victoria).

**Elder**

In Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities an Elder is a person considered by members of a community to possess skills, knowledge and experience which are considered important to that community.

**evidence**

In terms of RPL, evidence refers to documents or samples of work which can be used to show what an applicant has done in support of a claim—for example a wedding dress made by an applicant could be presented as evidence to claim RPL in a clothing course. Many things can be used as evidence in support of a claim for RPL but these need to be validated to show that they are the work of the applicant.

**exemption**

In a training organisation an applicant may get an exemption from attending part of a course if he/she has already got the skills and knowledge that would be covered in that part of the course.

**learning outcomes**

These are statements of what a learner is expected to be able to do as a result of a learning experience as well as the assessment conditions and level of performance required (*User's Guide to Course Maintenance Processes for System Wide Quality Assurance*, State Training Board, Victoria).

**learning style**

The way in which a learner prefers to approach a learning experience.

**mentor**

A person with the necessary skills, knowledge and experience to provide guidance and support to assist another to achieve personal, study or work goals.

**module**

A part of a course of study or training program.

**National Training Reform**

Formerly called the National Training Reform Agenda (NTRA), this describes a comprehensive series of changes to the Australian vocational education and training system in response to the requirements of industry and the need to improve the level of skills held by the workforce. Recognition of Prior Learning is an important element in the process of Training Reform as it provides a framework for the assessment of the skills and knowledge which an individual brings to a training organisation or to the workplace. This allows more effective targeting of training expenditure and can improve access to credentials for the individual.

**Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)**

Is a process for the recognition (accreditation) of an individual's skills and knowledge obtained through formal training (in industry and in training organisations, work experience and life experience. The main focus of RPL is the learning outcomes or competencies of these experiences; not how, when or where the learning occurred (*RPL Training and Application Manual for Education*, Kangan Institute of TAFE).

**RPL facilitator**

(This person may be referred to as the RPL assessor.) An RPL facilitator has the necessary skills and knowledge to coordinate and oversee the RPL process within an organisation. This means that the RPL facilitator may not necessarily have content knowledge of the particular learning outcomes or competency standards which will be assessed and will therefore not be responsible for the assessment decision. The assessment decision is made by the assessor(s). The RPL facilitator briefs the applicant, assessor(s) and the applicant's support person about the RPL process and the roles and responsibilities of each person involved in the RPL assessment. The RPL facilitator manages the RPL interview and is responsible for collating the assessment decisions of the assessor(s) and recording and processing the outcomes of the RPL assessment. In certain circumstances the RPL facilitator may also be the assessor.

**RPL support person**

The RPL support person may assist the applicant to prepare for the RPL assessment and attend an RPL interview with the applicant. A support person may be a person from the applicant's community or workplace with whom the applicant feels comfortable in discussing his/her skills. The support person

needs to understand the RPL process. In some circumstances the support person can validate or verify an applicant's claims.

## **Acronyms and Abbreviations**

### **ABSTUDY**

A scheme run by the Federal Government through the Commonwealth Department of Employment, Education and Training which provides help for adult Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders who decide to go back and continue their education.

### **ACTRAC**

Australian Committee for Training Research and Curriculum (now merged with NTB and NSDC to form the Standards and Curriculum Council).

### **NAIDOC**

National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Day Observance Committee.

### **NTB**

National Training Board (now merged with ACTRAC and NSDC to form the Standards and Curriculum Council).

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